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Claudia Wiepcke

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# Employability in the Bologna Process: An Area of Tension between Society, Businesses and Students

Claudia Wiepcke, University of Education Sw. Gmuend, BW, Germany

*Abstract: The concept of employability plays an increasingly important role in the political discussion, especially in the educational context of the Bologna Process. The emergence of this topic has to be considered against the background of different developments: Restructuring of labour markets and classes of business, changed economic requirements, internationalisation, europeanisation of educational policy etc. Thus, the discourse about employability is an expression of ongoing changes, which do not only affect the state and businesses, but also individuals. This article considers the question, which requirements result from the focussing of courses of studies on the employability of their graduates for universities. It will be inquired, how not only the state and businesses, but also individuals are affected by the employability strategy.*

Keywords: Employability, Bologna Process, Economic Education, Extracurricular Studies, Curriculum, Pedagogy

## Introduction: Employability as Objective of the Bologna Process

**F**OUNDATION FOR THE educational reform of the last decade is, among other things, the general objective of the EU to become ‘the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world’ within the next 10 years. The EU considers the development to an innovative knowledge-based society as the key to economic growth, employment and social cohesion (European Council 2000). On that assumption, educational policy pursues the aim to initiate processes of transformation to a European higher education area with standardised structures (Reuter 2003, 9). The Bologna Process creates an European translation system for the level of qualifications. Furthermore, universities are requested to establish a link between their courses of study and the (European) employment market (Universities UK 2002) and to arrange therewith associated study goals with respect to the employability of their graduates (BMBF 2007). Thus, the European educational policy explicitly focusses on the requirements of economy and creates general conditions to increase the mobility of students between and within the educational systems as well as the mobility of employees on the labour market. At the same time the higher level of transparency of course achievements brings about that it is easier for employers to compare levels of qualification and to acquire human resources throughout Europe.

The claim for employability as objective of the EU pursues economic technical goals as well as motives of social cohesion, equality of opportunities and quality of life. These goals address two essential protagonists, namely businesses and the state. Due to the employability of their employees, businesses gain competitiveness. Thus, the requirements with regard to employability aim at human performance for the creation of value and the enhancement of competitiveness of businesses. This efficiency aim at first only concentrates on the productiv-

ity of a human being in a company. At the same time the human development remains unconsidered (Mittelstaedt, Wiepcke 2007: 170). The claim for social cohesion, equality of opportunities and quality of life is – in the framework of the European objective target – an employability, which aims at sustainability (sustainable employability) (Richter n.d.: 2) and thus it is targeted at social success in particular (cf. endnote 1). In spite of a high rate of unemployment, the German economy is characterised by a lack of qualified and employable workforce (Inacker 2007: 32). At the same time the state is no longer in the position to provide for the employment of employees directly. Employment security cannot be guaranteed any more (Bosch 2002: 689). Anticipatory qualification and care for one's own employability can imply a higher employment rate and thus it can result in a better quality of life. In turn, the better quality of life leads to a reduction of social conflicts and tensions and thus to a better functioning welfare state (Wiepcke 2008).

In the following, the question will be discussed, in how far the enhancement of employability in the Bologna Process does not only consider the interest groups businesses and state, but also provides chances and risks for the concerned persons themselves – the students.

### **The Importance of Employability for University Graduates**

The concept of employability comprises criteria, which characterise an individual as capable or non-capable concerning his/her occupation (Blancke, Roth, Schmid 2000: 5). Employability has been related to as 'an individual's capacity to obtain and maintain fulfilling work; the capability to move self-sufficiently within the labour market; and the ability to realise potential through sustainable employment and knowledge, skills and attitude' (Kenny, English, Kilmartin 2007: 35). In order to ensure one's own employability throughout the whole working life, relevant expertise and competencies for changing scopes of duties have to be established, maintained and enhanced continually. This implies lifelong learning which is supposed to ensure the qualificational basis for coping with changing requirements. Thus, the concept of employability has significantly gained in importance since the 1990s. By now, it is considered as a central objective of education policy not only by the EU, but also by UNO and OECD.

Graduates are employable, if they exactly possess those abilities and skills, which are required by businesses. In this context - in addition to expertise – 'soft characteristics' become increasingly important for businesses. In the literature, these soft characteristics are not only referred to as soft skills, business skills, key qualifications but also as competencies (Mittelstaedt, Wiepcke 2007: 163). But what are the differences between these concepts?

### **Soft Skills and Networking**

Studies show, which characteristics are of utmost importance for businesses with regard to employees. Regardless of the occupation, the Institut der deutschen Wirtschaft (1997) mentions the attitude to work, achievement orientation, reliability, ability to work in a team, sense of responsibility, logical reasoning, initiative, self-dependent learning and motivation as the most important competencies. In addition, Rump and Eilers (2006) mention commitment, willingness to learn, empathy, resilience, ability to deal with conflicts, ability to reflect critically, readiness to change and frustration tolerance. The embedding into a network (networking) is increasingly considered as a general principle for the use of soft skills. Networking of employees within and outside the company (as, for example in informal working

groups and their communication with important stakeholders as, for example customers, suppliers, public authorities) strengthens – in the form of relational capital – the position of the company and helps individuals and the company to gain competitive advantages (Siemens 2006).

### ***Business Skills and Intrapreneurship***

Antoni and Sommerlatte (1999) analysed which knowledge is important for businesses. The study showed that in addition to methodological skills – thus the knowledge, *how something has to be done* - knowledge about products, customers, markets and competitors as well as its use have significantly gained in importance. At this point, business skills, which require economic knowledge as well as its realisation by employees, take on greater significance. According to Mittelstaedt and Wiepcke (2007) business skills relate to the handling of resources, i.e. to economic activities as planning, mastery of complexity, prioritisation, judging risks, negotiation, positioning, solving conflicts, judging, decision making and leading. These actions take place under the condition of scarce resources and their carrying out should incorporate economic patterns of thought. Thus, business skills comprise competencies for the reconstruction and application of decision-relevant knowledge in economically affected action situations (about business skills in detail see Mittelstaedt, Wiepcke 2007: 163).

Over the past years, in organisations new requirements for employees have emerged, which is referred to as intrapreneurship (Schulte 2006: 2). Intrapreneurship stands for entrepreneurial thinking and action in dependent employment and requires from employees not only to accomplish the formal requirements of the job. Rather, employees should be able to recognise or bring about business opportunities, i.e. being aware of price advantages, taking risks, coordinating resources and implementing innovations. In this context competencies such as innovative ability, willingness to take risks, leadership skills, ambiguity tolerance, achievement orientation, energy and initiative are essential (Wiepcke 2008b).

The following figure gives an overview of the relevant employability competencies.

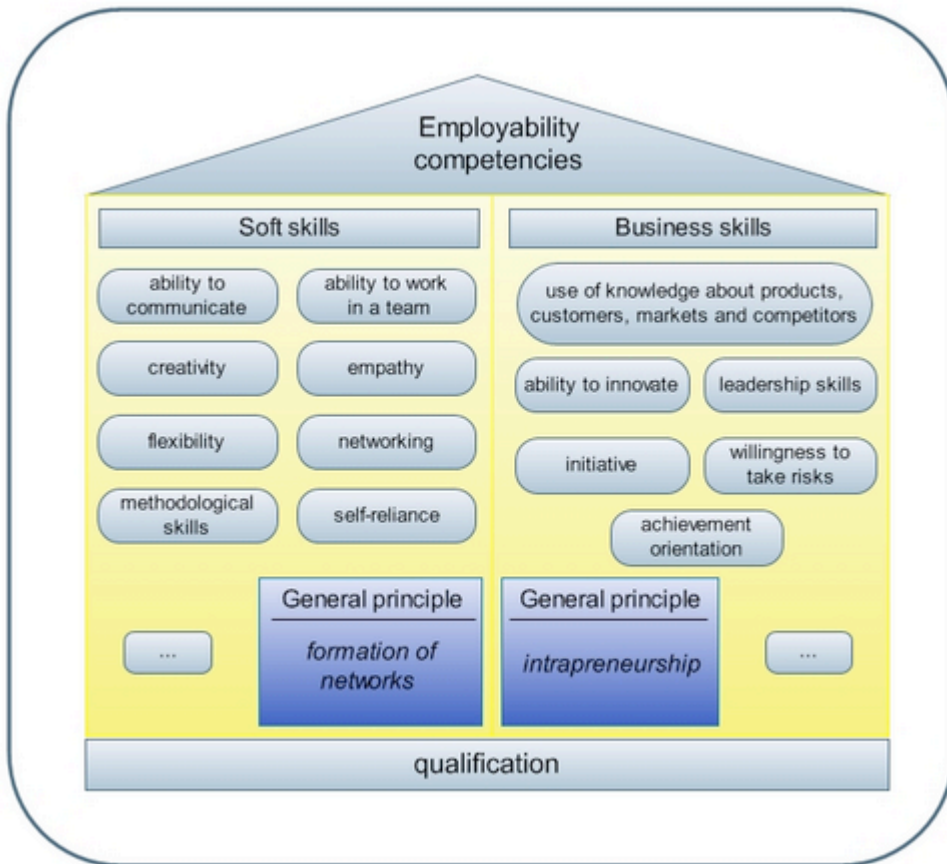


Illustration 1: Overview of the Requirements for University Graduates based on Mittelstaedt, Wiepcke 2007: 169

Altogether it can be summarised that only the cumulative fulfilment of soft and business skills makes university graduates completely qualified with respect to their employment. Whereas expertise is normally acquired by studies at university and soft skills, likewise, are implemented into the curricula in a cross-section of universities, this is rarely the case with regard to intrapreneurship and business skills for engineers, humanists or natural scientists as well as for teacher education.

**Chances and Risks of Employability**

That employable personnel is of use for businesses as well as for the state, has already been pointed out above. But what kind of chances and risks result from the employability strategy for the persons who are affected in the narrower sense – the students?

University graduates, who deal with the requirements of the labour market anticipatorily, have the possibility to increase their career opportunities. In a rapidly changing working

environment, they protect themselves with the help of continuous learning and further education. By acting as an entrepreneur on their own account, they make and maintain themselves competitive. Employable university graduates counter the high expectations of the labour market with a high level of competency so that they – in contrast to others - are in the position to cope with increasingly complex work environments. Lifelong learning enables them to deal with and to adapt their competencies and qualifications continuously. The consciousness and trust in one's own abilities and competencies increase self-confidence as well as individual responsibility and help job applicants to influence and to market their personal development. Therefore, university graduates have better opportunities to use their own initiative for directing their development in the favoured direction (Rump, Eilers 2006: 31).

Employability will be a chance for university graduates if they deal with their individual future on the labour market in an anticipatory and active way. Whereas employable university graduates will always have better career opportunities, non-market oriented students exclude themselves from the labour market. The more employability strategies find acceptance, the more non-employable persons are neglected on the labour market.

In the following, the question will be considered how students can gain consciousness for employability. The interdisciplinary competencies, which are demanded in the employability strategy (see figure 1) imply a long-lasting development process, which takes place during the whole life and which is developed with the help of emotion- and motivation activating learning processes (Heyse, Erpenbeck 2004: XX). Students have to be able to set themselves goals for their professional future and to put them into action. They have to recognise – beyond their studies - current needs of the markets and organise their procedure accordingly. At the same time they have to identify their needs, but also their abilities and competencies and offer them on the market (Blancke, Roth, Schmid 2000: 9). For this reason it is the task of universities to help students to create a consciousness for employability.

## **Employability as New Strategy for Universities**

As pointed out above a minimum of soft- and business skills are part of employability. Universities are not only in charge to make students employable so that the state and businesses benefit from this, but they also have to educate them. This fact entails that an university strategy which is oriented towards employability has to consider ethical questions. Consequently, employability has a relation to values and attitudes. The enhancement of employability is also a question of socialisation, and for this reason, university is an important place for socialisation (Fischer 2006: 88). In this context universities in their socialisation function have to offer a phase of life-oriented qualification, in which learning becomes a continuum. The following goals are of importance:

- Creation of framework conditions and enlargement of the choice at universities, which facilitate the necessary acquisition of competencies in addition to knowledge and science transfer
- Creation of a new attitude and mentality with respect to job (in)security, in order to reduce fears concerning uncertainty and helplessness with regard to the future occupational situation of university graduates
- Creation of a new self-conception that is not standard employment but employability.

- Creation of a mentality of lifelong learning, flexibility and mobility, so that continuous learning processes do not turn into a “situation of pressure” and cause fears of overstress or burn-out syndrome.

If universities meet the claims, which are implicated by the implementation of a successful employability strategy, the risks – mentioned in chapter 2.3 – can be counteracted. Only if university education succeeds in activating also “more passive” personalities in a motivating way with the help of academic programme and organisation of teaching, the dangers of underqualification becomes smaller. In the following, it will be pointed out which measures are available for universities to implement the Bologna objective of employability. How this strategy can be implemented, will be analysed using the example of the conversion to bachelor and master degree programmes at Technische Universitaet Dortmund.

### **Teacher Education at Technische Universitaet Dortmund**

Fischer (2006: 88f.) and Richter (n.d.: 5) have the following demands with regard to the implementation of an employability strategy at universities:

- Organisational freedom and provision of freedom and opportunities to experiment with regard to the methodical-didactical arrangement of courses,
- University didactical education of lecturers,
- Integration of supervised phases of placement or rather work experience in tertiary education,
- Integration of on-site seminars and contests,
- Co-operation with the economy with regard to the development and adaption of curricula,
- Co-operation with local employees,
- Consideration of competency training (soft- and business skills as well as intrapreneurship) in separate courses (offering of a “Studium Generale”),
- Enhancement of social commitment (e.g. by establishing a “social point system”),
- Quality management of higher education via internal or external surveys (internal surveys by developing the students’ critical abilities with regard to the experienced teaching and learning processes and providing the possibility that students criticise the courses given by lecturers,
- Integration or rather possibilities of stays abroad (placement and/ or semester(s) abroad),
- Combinability of modules across different universities.

With the help of the academic reform and the restructuring to bachelor and master degrees, universities are given the opportunity to implement the objectives of the Bologna Process. The example of teacher education of Technischen Universitaet Dortmund will show that a realisation of many of the mentioned points was accounted for.

### **Consideration of Competency Training**

A “Studium Generale” is partly covered by the field of study “Bildung & Wissen” (field of study at Technische Universitaet Dortmund). In the framework of “Bildung & Wissen” special competency trainings as well as practically relevant and occupational field-related elements are offered and interdisciplinary competencies are trained in addition to specialist



and methodical knowledge and abilities. The field of “Bildung & Wissen” consists of five competency areas which, on the one hand are integrated into all subjects as cross-sectional tasks and on the other hand are offered as separate courses for the enhancement of general education. In the focus of the competency areas are the ability to communicate, foreign language competency, media literacy, competency in dealing with diversity as well as advisory skills, competency in mentoring and imparting (Ruschin, Auferkorte-Michaelis 2006: 15).

### ***Integration of Supervised Phases of Placement***

Simultaneously, school- and industrial placements, which are accompanied by corresponding seminars, were integrated in the context of the restructuring from “traditional” teacher education to bachelor/ master. The seminars, which accompany practical trainings, are integrated into the field of “Bildung & Wissen” and are attended by lecturers of the respective subject. The lecturers provide assistance for the establishment of contacts with regional businesses and coordinate placement and research projects with the respective placement company.

### ***Training of Business Skills***

The orientation with regard to content of the field “Bildung & Wissen” shows that only a part of the claims that are formulated for university graduates (see figure 2) are covered, namely soft skills primarily. Business skills are not considered outside a study of business administration and economics. As business skills are to be attributed to economic education, it is advisable to extend the “Studium Generale” of Technische Universitaet Dortmund to economic topics and therewith connected methods such as case studies, business games, student companies, etc.

### ***Combinability of Modules across Different Universities***

With the modularisation of contents of study the structure of studies of Technischen Universitaet Dortmund was reorganised fundamentally. Courses were combined in thematic categories in order to ensure a definite function within a programme of study. The additional combination with a credit point system makes possible the changing to another place of study and facilitates international mobility (Franz, Ruschin 2006: 4).

### ***Enhancement of Social Commitment***

Due to the implementation of a “social point system”, students are incentivised to reduce their tuition fees, to get involved in social issues and to gain experiences in university committees. At Technische Universitaet Dortmund it is for example possible that the tuition fees are reduced by a maximum of 50 % for a maximum of 4 semesters if being elected into a voluntary committee (as, for example faculty student council or other students’ unions).

### ***Quality Management of Tertiary Education***

Quality management at Technische Universitaet Dortmund is ensured since the implementation of a quality management system in the year 2005. The quality management system,

which has been developed by the university in Dortmund, consists of a staged system and several phases. The establishment of quality management in teaching and studies, where quality audits, evaluation of courses by students and regular interviews with graduates are carried out, are in the foreground (Stich 2005: 7f.).

### ***Lacking University Didactical Education***

The explanations show that central claims of the objective target resulting from the Bologna Process (enhancement of employability at universities) are fulfilled at Technische Universität Dortmund. But as already pointed out above, employability and the corresponding soft- and business skills are closely connected to social and economic patterns of thought and action, as well as to values and attitudes. Thus, the second claim is aimed at the competency development of university lecturers. Normally, university lecturers have excellent expertise. But when enhancing the employability of students it is not enough to make factual contents a topic of discussion. Apart from that students are to be asked to participate in the development of abilities, which facilitate the favoured soft- and business skills. For this, it is important to organise learning processes in such a way that in addition to topics the methodological structuring becomes increasingly important. A reference framework is provided by action-oriented teaching, where working methods are offered in the form of multidimensional teaching and learning arrangements. For the implementation of such teaching, a multitude of methods, as, for example case studies, group and project work, excursion trips, role plays etc. play a decisive role (cp. Wiepcke 2008: 278). For this reason, lecturers are of importance in many respects. They hold the key role for the quality of academic education and are jointly responsible for the employability of their students. On the one hand they have to know, which requirements university graduates have to fulfil in order to be employable. On the other hand they have to be able to impart this knowledge and these abilities to them (Rump, Völker 2007: 107).

It has to be criticised that German university lecturers are only prepared inadequately for their function as lecturers. Whereas their expertise is outstanding, they are not trained teachers and are not able to provide a didactic-methodical qualification. But this is of utmost importance for tertiary education and thus also for the employability of students. One step into this direction would be to demand a university didactical education. Only this makes it possible to meet the second claim – competency development of lecturers and thus also action-oriented teaching.

### **Conclusion: Employability – Added Value for the State, Businesses and Students?**

The EU aims at economic and social progress as well as at a high level of employment. As a result of economic, technological, social and demographic changes the conditions on the labour market alter continuously. In order to act on these objectives in consideration of the development trends, the European educational policy concretises measures in the context of the Bologna Process, which enhance the employability of university graduates.

The analysis of chances and risks of an employability strategy for the state, businesses and students have shown that a high level of employability of persons is advantageous for the state as well as for the economic development. Those graduates, who, at university, were

able to develop essential competencies for protecting themselves against the risks in a fast changing working environment with the help of continuous learning and further education, possess the consciousness and confidence to use their own initiative for directing their development in the favoured direction (Rump, Eilers 2006: 13). They are given the opportunity to deal with their individual positioning on the labour market anticipatorily and actively and to find jobs which feature an adequate qualification- and salary level. If university graduates remove themselves from the expected standards of the labour market as a result of non-labour market oriented qualifications or lacking flexibility and mobility, this can lead to unemployment or jobs below the aspired qualifications and salary levels. The increasing responsibility for oneself and for one's own occupational biography could result in feelings of uncertainty and helplessness. The adoption of an internationally coordinated system of studies in the context of the Bologna Process implies an increasing comparability of degrees. The corresponding arrangement of reciprocal recognition, the specification and assessment of acquired competencies according to standardised patterns as well as the elaborate description of topics of study and competency profiles (Nagel 2006: 58) implicates an increased transparency of graduates' course achievements. This increased international comparability results in an increased pressure of competition between university graduates.

Universities as well as students are confronted with new challenges. Universities are expected to organise their structures with respect to the objectives in the Bologna Process and to develop general conditions for enhancing the employability of students. In doing so, universities have to give consideration to their holistic, education-oriented mission. Using the example of teacher education at Technische Universitaet Dortmund it could be shown that in the context of the restructuring to bachelor and master degree programmes many claims concerning an employability strategy have already been met, but that there is still a need for action in the field of capability for business skills as well as the university didactical education of teaching staff, but on the one, universities are asked to integrate economic educational modules as a part of extracurricular studies. On the other hand it is recommended to demand a university didactical education from lecturers, in order to guarantee a new didactical appreciation for action-oriented teaching.

Not only universities, but also students will be faced with a new responsibility. They are expected to make use of competency-oriented, economic learning opportunities and to accept responsibility for themselves and for their own occupational biography to a greater extent.

## Endnote

1. Sustainability means that generations at the present time should satisfy their demands without affecting future generations in their satisfaction of demand. It is the objective to enhance a sustainable development by means of an equal organisation of ecological, economic and social dimensions. In this context the social dimension calls for social security, democracy and rule of law, social integration and chances in life as well as social welfare (Rogall 2000: 27). The objective of sustainability can, among other things, be achieved with a high level of employment. Social cohesion, equality of opportunities and a high quality of life can result in a better functioning welfare state and thus they fulfil the social dimension of sustainability. This argumentation shows that the objective target of sustainable employability is rather oriented towards social success.

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## About the Author

*Dr. Claudia Wiepcke*

Dr. Claudia Wiepcke is deputy professor and head of department in economic education at University of Education Sw. Gmuend, Germany. Her dissertation thesis was about ICT's and their evaluation in further education with focus on gender mainstreaming. For the last five years she has taught in the business teacher education program. Her lectures address case writing, cultural diversity and business German as a foreign language. In recent empirical studies Claudia investigates thoroughly diagnostics and development of business competences with emphasis on employability.



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