

«The Pressure of Study is Much Too High»

Prof. Dr. Dieter Timmermann

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trans. Peter Bernard Ladkin

[Professor Dr. Dieter Timmermann is Professor for Education Planning and Economy at the University of Bielefeld and was Rector – the academic head – of the university for 8 years from 2001-2009, when he retired from the university. He is one of six finalists for prize of University Rector of the Year 2010 in Germany. He studied largely as an economist.]

Q: Professor Timmerman, it is a number of years ago, but we would still like to ask you: what did you really enjoy as a student?

DT: I valued the recreational opportunities in the first semesters. In Bonn [where I studied], macroeconomics was a course without intermediate exams, without a Vordiplom [a qualification roughly equivalent to completing U.S. lower division coursework]. There was no curriculum. I played a lot of football. I really enjoyed the small study groups with four or five other students. That was usual in the later semesters. Then we began really to study.

Q: You looked around academically [german expression: looked over the edge of the plate]?

DT: Yes. [I used] my first year to get my bearings. I did sociology, heard lectures in art history, in philosophy. It is very important, to use the period of studying [at university] to have a personal debate with oneself as to the importance of things, and not simply just to sit there and listen.

Q: Many Bachelor's-program students from today would be envious!

DT: Yes, unfortunately today it is easier said than done, because the course of study is so completely stuffed full.

Q: With the introduction of Bachelor's degrees, the body politic wanted to implement internationally comparable courses of study, and companies wanted younger graduates [as beginning employees].

DT: I have to admit today that a lot has gone wrong. The three years of study for a Bachelor's are stuffed full with knowledge transfer. Students often have unimaginative exams, often only written ones. We shouldn't be surprised that students just learn superficially for the exams.

Q: The [system of] credit points is all-important.

DT: Unfortunately. Nowadays the first semesters aren't relaxed, you have to accumulate credit points from the beginning onwards. Otherwise your course of study takes longer, and that costs money. The pressure is on to study in a disciplined fashion. Because of this [situation], we need a reform of the reforms!

Q: So a different form of Bachelor's?

DT: Yes. We should release students from some of their requirements, so that they have more time

for their own studies and for looking around [academically]. We must have courses of study which offer personal development and directions for knowledge. And in which qualifying oneself for a career is less emphasised.

Q: But that was supposedly the goal of Bachelor's courses!

DT: I think simply that universities and the universities of applied science [Fachhochschule] cannot qualify people for a career. At most for a research career, but not for company manager.

Q: Objection from the business sector!

DT: The demand that we often hear for more practically-oriented study is thoroughly wrong. I am firmly against the narrow interpretation of «qualifications». A course of study should first and foremost be about knowledge. Business is gradually coming to realise this.

Q: [Is] career-orientation [also wrong] for the universities of applied science [Fachhochschulen], which are indeed [places in which] the knowledge is applied?

DT: Yes. Personal development through the preoccupation with knowledge awakens and strengthens cognitive skills. That does not mean that a professor should not show [his/her students] where a theory can be practically applied and where it is relevant. Maybe not in Theoretical Physics looking at the Big Bang, but [for example] by economists, who talk about [say, cost-benefit] calculations. A university of applied science can work with more practical examples, whereas a university goes deeper into fewer examples to a higher level of abstraction and shows the general connections [amongst things].

Q: Can that be done in 3-year courses?

DT: No. We need a 4-year Bachelor's. With many [offerings] that combine subjects, as in the U.S. or Canada. For example, so that someone with a Bachelor's in Psychology or Sociology can do a Master's in Law. This competency-mixing would do Germany a lot of good.

Q: What will the ideal course of study look like in the future?

DT: It should activate the faculty of learning in people, not the faculty of scurrying through lectures and exams. People should be empowered to work and discuss with others. They should dig into their subjects, not remain at a superficial level. Only when students have the feeling that they can flourish intellectually can they really experience the joy of learning.