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## Bachelor studies and labour market from the perspective of students

Analysis by type of higher education institution and subject area

In order to be able to discuss questions related to the Bachelor studies and their labour market relevance in an empirically founded manner, one possibility is to use surveys among stakeholders. This report does this using data from the 2009 Student Social Survey. In Austria more than 40,000 students took part in the survey, and some 39 percent were students in Bachelor programmes. They form the sample for this analysis. We want to thank the Austrian Institute for Advanced Studies IHS for making the data available.

### *High importance of employment-related study motives*

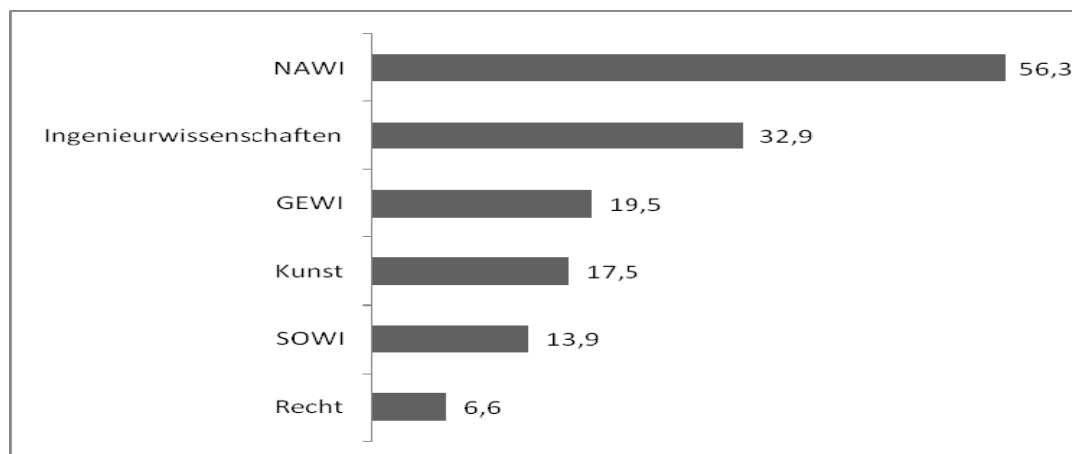
As can be expected, it can be seen that *the interest in a specific subject area* is important for the choice of studies of Bachelor students in all types of higher education (HE) institutions. In addition to this study motive, which can be taken for granted, students are driven by the programmes' labour-market relevance: For 73 percent of respondents from all types of HE institutions, *improved chances on the labour market* constituted a major factor

in their decision for the studies (university college of education or *PH*: 46 percent; university: 74 percent; *Fachhochschule* or *FH*: 83 percent); in business-oriented subject areas this share is up to 90 percent.

This means that neither university students nor *FH* students consciously distance themselves ideologically from labour market relevance. In the majority of subject areas it occurs comparatively rarely that students see the studies as entry to employment as a researcher or scientist, a view which is important at universities.

GRAPH:

Study motive "Because I wanted to be a researcher and/or scientist" broken down by university subject area groups, in % (answer categories "Strongly applies" and "Applies")



Source: 2009 Student Social Survey; own presentation

### *Science and research as a profession relevant only for a small group*

Even though over 90 percent state their interest in the subject as a real reason for their choice of study course, it is for only 22 percent of Bachelor students that this means they want to take up a researching career. This share is slightly higher at around 27 percent among respondents from scientific universities. In the natural science studies, however, conspicuously high shares can be found (56 percent university; 71 percent *FH*). Therefore it is not equally relevant for all subject areas that pre-professional qualifications are primarily oriented towards young scientists and researchers.

### *Studies as continuing vocational training or reorientation*

At the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century studies as a form of continuing vocational education and training (CVET) are of similar importance in terms of quantity as the motive “Becoming a researcher”: with 23 percent, almost one quarter of Bachelor students indicated a related study motive. “Because I wanted to train myself further in my practised/learned profession” was the reason for some 19 percent of Bachelor students at scientific universities and 33 percent in *Fachhochschule* programmes.

Different professional career relevance is expressed by the statement “Because I wanted to reorient myself professionally”. Most frequently *PH* students agreed to this statement with 34 percent (university 19 percent, *FH*: 28 percent).

It is obvious that, in our knowledge-based world of work, HE institutions with a study rate of 32 percent (2007) as a societal trend are involved in more varied professional career strategies than, for example, at a time when only around 8 percent of one age group found their way to the country’s HE institutions (1964/65, Educational Planning in Austria 1967, p. 150). The Bologna process, which provides for a graded and extensible HE system, as well as EU recommendations on the promotion of lifelong learning serve to strengthen these trends.

This goes hand in hand with high shares of people who work before taking up studies. According to a survey conducted in the summer of 2009, the proportion of regular employees before the beginning of their studies in the subject area groups of technology, engineering, economic and social sciences in *Fachhochschule* programmes comes to between 34 and 38 percent and is therefore clearly above the overall average (for all types

of HE institutions) of some 23 percent (university: 18 percent; *FH*: 35 percent).

### *Almost 40 percent are working during the semester*

In the 2009 Student Social Survey, around 38 percent of respondents indicated that they were working during the entire semester. In this respect, there are only marginal differences between university and *FH*. Half of the students employed in the summer semester who were enrolled in a Bachelor programme stated their employment was “demanding in terms of content”. For over 40 percent of employees enrolled in Bachelor studies, there is a connection between the contents of the studies and employment during the semester. The more qualified the employment, the more frequently there is a connection to the study content, and vice versa.

It can therefore be assumed that HE attendance aims at higher qualification alongside employment for more than 40 percent of working students; among students in *Fachhochschule* programmes, this share is 56 percent, and at scientific universities it is 35 percent. A high percentage of technology students in both HE types state that their studies are connected with their work in terms of content.

Some 20 to 30 percent of respondents have a job as low-qualified employees. Around 44 percent of employed students see difficulties in reconciling their studies and job in terms of time. Many of these students want to reduce their employment during the semester.

### *“Studiability”: FH courses offer better framework conditions*

Around 58 percent of respondents enrolled at universities in Bachelor studies expressed the opinion that they were progressing more slowly than originally planned in their studies, the comparative value for *FH* programmes was merely 6 percent (!).

In principle only 55 percent of respondents consider it possible to complete *university-based Bachelor courses* within the minimum study duration due to the conditions prevailing in their courses. The “overcrowding of lectures” at universities is perceived at varying frequency by students, depending on the subject area groups they are enrolled for:

- Whereas this opinion was expressed by merely 16 percent in the engineering sciences, this figure was as high as 34 percent in the legal and natural sciences and even 48 percent among students of the humanities and cultural sciences.

- Inhibiting aspects in the studies that are named by 41 percent of students of the humanities and cultural sciences are “too infrequent offers of compulsory lectures” (overall uni: 33, FH: 1.5 percent).
- The item “insufficient information about studies and the organisation of studies” also relatively often meets with agreement among this subpopulation (38 percent vs. 25 percent in the average of interviewees from all types of HE institutions).
- High performance requirements (e.g. difficult exams) however were stated by students of the engineering sciences at universities far more often than the average as a reason for delays in study progress (48 percent vs. 33 percent overall).

### *75 percent want to continue with Master studies*

75 percent of the respondents want to continue with relevant Master studies after the Bachelor course (at universities 80 percent, in *Fachhochschule* programmes 73 percent). Only students of the social sciences (53 percent) and health sciences (44 percent) in *Fachhochschule* programmes are below the average value of

75 percent. At universities, the highest share of those who want to continue with Master studies is 88 percent in the engineering sciences.

About one third of interviewees in Bachelor studies are intending to take up, extend or continue employment (unis: 27 percent; FH: 42 percent).

### *Uncertain about professional and career opportunities*

Some 29 percent of all questioned Bachelor students stated they already had “concrete ideas” about their professional activity upon completion of their studies; at unis, this percentage was 22 percent, at FHs 34 percent and at PHs 72 percent. These differences reflect the teleological structures of the HE landscape. Despite the lack of concrete professional ideas after completion of the studies, 73 percent stated “improved labour market opportunities” as a study motive (uni: 74 percent; FH: 83 percent). The lack of a concrete professional idea is obviously connected with the intention to continue with Master studies upon completion of the Bachelor programme.

TABLE

**“How important were future labour market opportunities for the selection of your course / branch of study?”  
Replies by subject area group, in % (line), 2009**

Type of HE institution or subject area group	Very important	2	3	4	Not important at all
<b><i>University</i></b>					
Legal science studies	43.0	33.9	16.6	3.8	2.7
Social and economic science studies	35.3	34.9	16.4	9.5	3.9
Engineering studies	30.4	34.4	18.3	9.9	7.1
Artistic studies	13.6	33.0	9.5	16.9	27.1
Natural science studies	11.8	27.9	27.7	20.9	11.7
Humanities and cultural science studies	9.2	21.7	24.7	23.5	20.8
<b><i>Fachhochschule (polytechnic)</i></b>					
Natural sciences	69.1	14.6	16.3	0.0	0.0
Economic sciences	52.6	32.2	10.3	2.6	2.2
Technology, engineering sciences	50.2	30.3	11.5	4.9	3.0
Health sciences	49.8	33.0	9.9	6.5	0.8
Design, art	26.7	31.8	30.7	6.4	4.5
Social sciences	24.3	29.6	23.8	15.7	6.7
Total	28.4	29.6	19.2	13.2	9.6

Source: 2009 Student Social Survey; own presentation

One difference between university and *FH* is in the assessment of the function of the studies in the preparation for future employment: whereas merely 36 percent of university Bachelor students assume they are being prepared well for employment, this share is 62 percent in Fachhochschule programmes. This expresses, on the one hand, the higher share of business-linked studies and the orientation to the professional field in the *FH* sector, and on the other hand the fundamentally different concept of the university system, which focuses more on academic pre-professional education and widely utilisable qualifications.

It is essential that, despite the clearly improved assessment of labour market preparation in *FH* studies compared to university, the intention to continue with Master studies is also very high with 73 percent in *FH*-based Bachelor students. The slight inclination to drop out after the Bachelor course is associated with the efficiency of the Austrian tradition of long first studies and the high requirement level of HE. This is proved by the intention to reference the diploma of both types of HE at Level 7 of eight possible levels of the EQF. For a long time other countries have had HE diplomas and HE certificates below Level 7, mostly at Levels 5 and 6. Public discussions on Bachelor courses, which have been affected by influential commentators with sceptical articles, have expressed this attitude and reinforced in the minds of students.

It is a fact that new graduates with a diploma, particularly in non-business-related studies, have had to face difficult entry situations on the labour market for quite a long time already (cf. Putz et al.: *Entry into the World of Work, Job Experiences, Employment Opportunities: University graduates*. AMS, 2008). These problems are connected with the big increase in annual graduate figures and are further aggravated by the international economic crisis. At a current graduation rate of 22 percent per age group (OECD: *Education at a Glance 2009*, Paris 2009, p. 85) not all graduates can enter traditional academic professions (according to a projection of the Austrian Institute of Economic Research WIFO these will be 10 percent of the workforce in 2012) or management functions, new professional fields also need to be pursued and conquered, partly in self-employment and – unfortunately – often also in so-called atypical forms of employment. In addition, so far there has been a relatively close connection between the graduates' study branch and employment only in those diploma studies that lead to regulated professional fields (e.g. medicine or teaching), as has

been shown by the REFLEX study of the Klagenfurt-based Institute of Sociology, for example. Almost double as frequent is the correlation between employment and the "studied or a related study branch". This means that entry into the world of work is, as a rule, relatively wide and determined by interdisciplinary key skills and often also additional qualifications (languages, ICT knowledge).

It cannot be expected that the horizontal and vertical extension of the professional spectrum of graduates, which is far more pronounced in countries with a long-standing Bachelor tradition and graduation rates of 40 percent and more per age group (cf. OECD 2009, loc. cit., p. 80) than in Austria, where to date holders of the upper secondary school-leaving certificate *Matura* with CVET qualifications have exercised comparable intermediary and advanced functions, will be effected already in an anticipatory manner, it will only be identifiable afterwards. Both labour market parties are required to adapt and be able to innovate here.

The intention to continue studies is frequently connected with only vague professional ideas about what is possible after the Bachelor studies. The option to continue with Master studies represents a hedging strategy and should therefore not be blocked in the students' minds prematurely and without too much thought by public statements about admission obstacles. The HE institutions' financing and capacity problems as well as the issue of a modern structure of the tertiary education system should not be confounded with the Bologna process.

An HE landscape with broad commitment and integration into the national and European lifelong learning strategy requires a high degree of openness for innovation in structure, offers and use of resources and, not least, more cooperation and partnership between universities, *Fachhochschule* institutions, VET colleges (*BHSs*) and adult education establishments. It will also not be possible to create Bachelor and Master studies simply according to a system, this has to be with thorough consideration of educational objectives and labour market relevance depending on the respective type of HE institution and subject area. It would be wrong and can hardly be expected to be accepted if professional relevance is defined too narrowly and building on regulated professions.

The entire study can be obtained from ibw in printed form (ibw research report no. 154, ISBN 978-3-902742-24-7) or [online](#).