

EDITORIAL

When presenting our first letter of *journeymen news* we are well aware of the diversity of difficulties in the field of higher education: On one hand regarding the generally vague job-perspectives after leaving the university and the uncertain relationship between the curricula of study courses and the required competencies of work life on the other. The overall goals of our international project were briefly described in an exposé during our conference of the research consortium in May 2003:

We may say, then, that the process of building European identity has a twofold character: on the one hand it speaks to shared cultural values (one of which is traditional, elitist academic education) and on the other to the creation of institutional foundations of the European “state” where economic integration, hence the issue of common standards for workforce qualifications, play an important role. This dichotomy reflects the historical traits of “cultural” and “political” nationalism employed in the process of construction of modern nation-states (Wiborg 2000). It is also congruent with the previously mentioned tension between the perspectives of *bildung* and utilitarianism in discussing the goals of higher education. The growing need to enhance the prospects of learning, so that European societies meet the challenges of the new information era and globalisation, results in an increasing demand for efficiency and performance control. Education is more and more often perceived in terms of human capital management. This technocratic perspective is usually considered to be at odds with those traditions embedded in educational institutions that speak to the issues of traditional cultural identities, hopes for social change, or existential needs of making sense of individual lives.

In this context it is important to develop an understanding of how these dimensions of education overlap and interfere in the practices of higher education and in the minds of the students in European countries. The unifying factors imposed on individual strategies of learning by the political and economic systems of Europe somehow translate themselves into diversified individual life strategies mediated by institutional, and generally by cultural contexts in which students learn to make meaning of their experience. The planned research, employing the methodologies of phenomenographic interviews to elicit individual conceptions, and of discourse analysis to embed them in broader cultural and political narratives, will investigate the issue of transition between higher education and work as the one in which diversified learning strategies, and conflicting cultural discourses come into complex relations.

We like to demonstrate the complex conception of the empirical investigation on the transition process between the beginning and finishing of individual studies in at least two comparable subject areas focussing then on the introduction phase of a chosen profession (as novices). Thus we try to find out how all these *journeymen* manage to find their sophisticated ways and means *between communities of higher education and work life* under very different conditions and perspectives in the four European countries of Norway and Sweden in Scandinavia, in Germany and Poland in Central Europe.

By methods of critical discourse analysis we have already discovered individual approaches of interviewed students such as their ambition for

emancipation and personal maturation in the context of learning. Main issues for these students seem to be personal development and social competencies. Others seem to emphasize more the career building in regional or European contexts and utilize the university as a service provider for achieving professional competence. In this respect the relationship between practice and theory plays a vital role in relation to scientific or professional work life in their future. There are more and more aspects to be identified in our broad research field very soon..

Manfred Bayer

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

Our research project *journeymen* (students as journeymen between communities of higher education and work life) has started in September 2001. The project is financially supported by the European Commission in Bruxelles, an authority that among other things is responsible for the joint research efforts within the European Union. The project will last until August 2004 with the option on an extension. The participating universities are Linköping (Sweden) and Oslo (Norway) in Scandinavia, Duisburg-Essen (Germany) and Gdansk (Poland) in Central Europe.

The main aim of the project is to study how students and young academic professionals conceive of their learning environments during their studies and in work life. The international research consortium is particularly interested in how far students reflect their experiences during the transition process from studies to work life. We are also interested in how – and to what extent – higher education prepares for professional work.

Students in the beginning and at the end of their studies participate as respondents in this study. The latter group is also interviewed after about one year of work life's experiences. This third period of interviewing is being worked on at present. All data will be treated confidentially and no subject will be identifiable in our reports.

The project will, hopefully, contribute to a better understanding of the demands to be put on higher education and ultimately also to shed light on how the quality of higher education may be further improved.