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Teaching objective Democracy: Are we living up to our responsibility?

In a deliberate change to the theme of this issue, "Democracy as a learning objective", the professorial approach to the legal mandate will be questioned here. It will become apparent that the answer to the question posed is rather ambivalent.

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Photo: private

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The central objectives of the degree course are essentially described in the relevant federal and state higher education laws.¹ Section 7 of the Higher Education Framework Act (HRG) is cited as an example:

"Teaching and studies should prepare the student for a professional field of activity and provide him with the necessary specialist knowledge, skills and methods for the respective course of study in such a way that he is enabled to carry out scientific or artistic work and to act responsibly in a liberal, democratic and social constitutional state."

In their day-to-day work, there is no question that the universities of applied sciences (HAW) achieve the first-mentioned goals for their graduates:

Teaching and studies should prepare students for a professional field of activity and provide them with the necessary specialist knowledge, skills and methods in accordance with the respective course of study ...

However, to what extent the two supposed boundary conditions

- Ability to take responsibility acting in a free, democratic and social constitutional state and

- Ability to carry out scientific or artistic work

The conditions that are pursued in day-to-day business differ from university to university, from department to department, from degree program to degree program, from professor to professor. It would be wrong to read this as a marginal or secondary condition. A closer reading of the sentence makes it clear that both qualifications are to be understood both as a foundation, as a prerequisite for later professional activity, and at the same time as overriding, primary goals of a degree course.

If German higher education institutions (universities and universities of applied sciences) have the claim and the obligation to bring up the next generation of academic leaders in our society, then these two primary goals must be far more in the focus of each individual teacher than is currently and mostly the case in view of the abundance of other daily tasks such as research, (university) administration, transfer, further education (incidentally, a further argument for the fulfillment of the **hlb research 12plusOne**).

In view of the epochal mixed situation due to growing threats, for example from

- insufficiently slowed down Climate trends,
- unregulated AI applications that troll factories with "alternative

¹ Objective(s) of study in DE: § 7 HRG, DE-BB: § 17 BbgHG, DE-BE: § 21 BerlHG, DE-BW: § 29 LHG, DE-BY: Art 76 BayHG, DE-HB: § 52 HG, DE-HE: § 15 HessHG, DE-HH: § 49 HmbHG, DE-MV: § 3 LHG M-V, DE-NI: § 3NHG, DE-NW: § 58 LHG, DE-RP: § 16 HochSchG, DE-SH: § 3 i. V. m. § 46 HSG, DE-SL: § 56 SHSG, DE-SN: § 15 HSG, DE-ST: § 6 HSG LSA, DE-TH: § 46 ThürHG.

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facts" and AI-generated fake audios/photos/-videos, perhaps even opening the gates wide to machine domination in the end,

- intensified competition between the major political-economic blocs, resulting in international polarization,
- Russia's willingness to protect its own claim to power in an imperialist war of aggression,
- a hot war in Israel and Gaza, numerous The Middle East and at least "lukewarm" conflicts in the Maghreb or the Balkans,
- China's latent efforts to become the hegemon, at least in the Asia-Pacific region,
- the uncertainties and distortions associated with would be associated with another election victory for Donald Trump in the fall,
- manifested in election results trend towards right-wing nationalist-populist governments that instrumentalize (not to say "undermine") the rule of law, even in the EU,
- in our geographical area as well. disruptive criminal actions with state backers (such as pipeline explosions, destruction of central data lines, hacking of state and municipal institutions and critical infrastructure),
- social division tendencies and Dysfunctionalities in parliaments and governments,
- the perceived inability of democratic legitimized institutions to solve problems quickly, purposefully and "unbureaucratically",
- Media that are geared to increasing their circulation and lower number to greater importance

as ethically responsible, truthful reporting and factual, serious commentary on events,

the ability of our students to act responsibly in a liberal, democratic and social constitutional state is to be seen as a task of the highest order; the importance of introducing students to an early and sustainable assumption of responsibility in our society cannot be overestimated.

The first step in young people's own social engagement today is usually event- and project-related, short-term, temporary and manageable (examples: refugee aid in 2015, various climate movements). However, this is not the way to go in the long term, as it also requires accepting the hardships of the level, i.e. long-term, sustained assumption of responsibility in parties² and the many other social institutions. It is rather irrelevant whether these are political, social, church, sporting or other activities, as long as they remain within the democratic spectrum. The fact that there is often a lack of sustainable commitment is shown by the long death of associations because there are no more young people who want to prove themselves as board members - a major challenge, especially in Germany with its strong tradition of voluntary association work. Our students must once again learn to take their own affairs into their own hands.

This is where we seem to be failing at universities. Participation in student elections³ alone raises the question of whether the 500-year-old, original democratic claim "Nihil de nobis, sine nobis"⁴ means nothing to the majority of students:

Faculty of Trier University of Applied Sciences	Profs.	Active voters Profs.	Electoral participation Profs.	Students entitled to vote	Active voters Stud.	Electoral participation Stud.
Building & Living	22	13	59,1 %	609	14	2,3 %
Computer science	17	16	94,1 %	1.105	66	6,0 %
Technology	25	16	64,0 %	768	8	1,0 %
Economy	15	12	80,0 %	843	67	7,9 %
Design	37	29	78,4 %	1.149	99	8,6 %
Environmental planning & technology	33	30	90,9 %	909	177	19,5 %
Environmental economics & law	22	12	54,5 %	808	111	13,7 %
Σ HS Trier	171	128	74,9 %	6.191	542	8,8 %

² Art. 21 para. 1 sentence 1 GG: "The parties shall participate in the formation of the political will of the people."

³ In the table (right-hand column), elections in 2020 (professors) and 2023 (students) to the Senate and the faculty councils (different years due to different election periods) are shown quite representatively using the example of Trier University of Applied Sciences.

⁴ The constitution of the Polish Diet of Radom in 1505 coined the principle "Nihil de nobis, sine nobis (Nothing about us without us)".

"Introducing students to a sustainable assumption of responsibility in our society at an early age is of incalculable importance."

If single-digit voter turnout (the willingness of students to vote is an even greater tragedy) is the rule rather than the exception, something is wrong with the democratic self-image and commitment of our students.

At this point, the first sentences of Immanuel Kant's "Answering the Question: What is Enlightenment?" should be recalled:

"Enlightenment is man's exit from his self-inflicted immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's intellect without the guidance of another. This immaturity is self-inflicted if the cause of it is not a lack of understanding, but a lack of determination and courage to make use of it without the guidance of another. Sapere aude! Have the courage to use your own understanding! is therefore the motto of the Enlightenment.

Laziness and cowardice are the reasons why such a large proportion of people, after nature has long since pronounced them free from external guidance (naturaliter maiorennes), nevertheless like to remain immature for a long time; and why it becomes so easy for others to be their guardians. It is so comfortable to be immature."

Immaturity and subsequent inactivity may be convenient, but they are not justifiable in view of the current world situation. Friedrich Ebert's oft-circulated insight "Democracy needs democrats" is a wake-up call, and we teachers must constantly remind our students of this appeal to personally stand up for our free and democratic basic order. The state is not "politics", on which responsibility is often - and often wrongly - shifted: the state is all of us, and each and every one of us is (jointly) responsible for providing for our individual and social existence.

In view of this, we professors have the elementary task of setting an example for the continued existence of a social order that conforms to the constitution. We would like to emphasize our importance as "role

model", we would not be able to meet this requirement. We must seek out and repeatedly demand engagement and open discussion with our students on socially relevant topics. We must not let our students "off the hook", which of course does not mean that we indoctrinate them, unfairly overpower them with our possible advantage in knowledge and experience, or only allow our own opinion to count. 90 minutes spent in such discussions are ultimately more formative and forward-looking than any 90 minutes of thermodynamics, business administration or nursing practice.

The second objective, namely the "ability to do academic or artistic work", may seem banal in view of what has been established and demanded above. But here, too, there are deficits with regard to the "teaching goal of democracy" that need to be eliminated.

Support without challenge does not work in higher education. If one observes the long-term development in the German education system, it can be stated that the Abitur alone no longer guarantees a university entrance qualification. Added to this is the socially desired and politically demanded opening up of universities to other access routes, keyword "Meisterabitur". However much the HAW stand for the permeability of the German education system: We must not close our eyes to the resulting problems.

The fact that first-semester students do not know the rule of three, percentages, let alone infinitesimal calculus or elementary statistics, may still be partially repairable through bridge courses, preparatory courses or similar (incidentally, these are not original university tasks). However, if the ability to pronounce or write down a "straight sentence" is also lacking, it becomes difficult. There is probably no university teacher in Germany who would not despair at the lack of skills and abilities in terms of spelling, punctuation, grammar, sentence structure and text logic. If even Master's students who have already been awarded their first academic degree still deliver work that does not meet academic requirements, then there is no doubt that this is a problem.

If the teaching methods are at best ^{limited}⁵, this is also due to a lack of willingness on the part of teachers to take responsibility.

It must not just be a matter of somehow getting our respective specialist topics across to men and women. In every conversation with employers and their associations, in every feedback from HAW graduates, regardless of their provenance, it becomes clear that at best 10 or 15 percent of the specialist knowledge acquired at the university is directly usable when starting a career - the know-how necessary for the profession is essentially only imparted by the subsequent employer. This is not a reproach to the UAS, but is in the nature of things: as long as the UAS are less well equipped in terms of material resources and (scientific) staff than competing companies, little can change. Incidentally, the deficits of university graduates are not addressed by employers or their representatives as a lack of specialist, IT or foreign language skills or even experience abroad, but rather a lack of soft skills such as teamwork, leadership, social and intercultural skills, as well as a lack of ability to work independently in interdisciplinary projects with possibly changing employees and flexible hierarchies (ultimately also democratic "basics").

For us professors, this means that a two-hour introductory course on "Scientific Work" in the first semester by no means guarantees the application of basic methodology. It is rather counterproductive to want to support students (to avoid the word "pampering") by having every department publish its own design guidelines for theses, citation rules, etc.: this only encourages lazy thinking and prevents students from looking for their own, perhaps better solutions. The same applies to numerous other measures that universities come up with in their need to supposedly support students: In many cases, these measures disempower students, make them look everywhere but themselves for responsibility for a failed exam, and in any case hardly lead to independent academic work being practiced. And just for the sake of remembrance: "Study" is of Latin origin and means zeal, effort, endeavor, desire ...

Teachers must rather be able to provide the necessary information in every (!) course, whether lecture, seminar, exercise, practical laboratory course or similar, in every (!) examination (written, oral, practical, in lower-ranking assignments, etc.).

as in highly remunerated theses) correct violations of good scientific practice and impose sanctions if necessary. And not just once, but over and over again. "Repetition reinforces" - this also applies to formal aspects of academic work. As sad as it is, even "impeccable German" (already one of the minimum requirements in the Tutzing Maturity Catalog of the West German Rectors' Conference and the Conference of Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of 1958) must be demanded until spelling, grammar, sentence structure and logical consistency meet academic requirements.⁶

And this is the latest way to reconnect with the teaching goal of democracy: Are students who are only capable of linguistic differentiation to a limited extent, who only "inform" themselves in their filter bubbles, in a position to take responsibility now and later? Who still reads the daily newspaper and watches the news every day? Who keeps up to date with local, regional, national and international current affairs without prejudice, and does so consciously from media that may have different ideological orientations and not just from X, Instagram, TikTok or some off-the-wall blog recommended by an algorithm? We need to put students and graduates in a position to distinguish between delusion and reality in times when AI can construct anything. How are they supposed to distinguish between right and wrong if they have not internalized the scientifically sound methodology? This is the only way to lay the foundation for forming their own fact-based opinion and subsequent action. Relying solely on "common sense" today means overstressing the principle of hope ...

So if we want to do justice to all of the objectives of the degree course mentioned at the beginning, we professors at the HAW are also required to do so. That the prerequisites, in particular the two highest-ranking objectives

- Ability to act responsibly in a liberal, democratic and social constitutional state and
- Qualification for scientific or artistic work educational work

The fact that it is not possible to achieve these goals in daily practice due to the teaching load and the frequent lack of academic support does not release us from the urgent need to move closer to these goals - in both our own and society's interest. Setting these priorities correctly in achieving our goals is one of the few remaining privileges of the freedom of research and teaching. So let's get on with it, it's high time!

⁵ On the fundamental problem, supplemented by examples, see Jochen Struwe: Ideological persuaders with an academic title vs. academics with a solid set of values. In: The New University 4/2018, p. 12 ff.

⁶ This paragraph taken from Jochen Struwe: op. cit. p. 14 f.