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Open University Lüneburg

Success factors for studying parallel to work

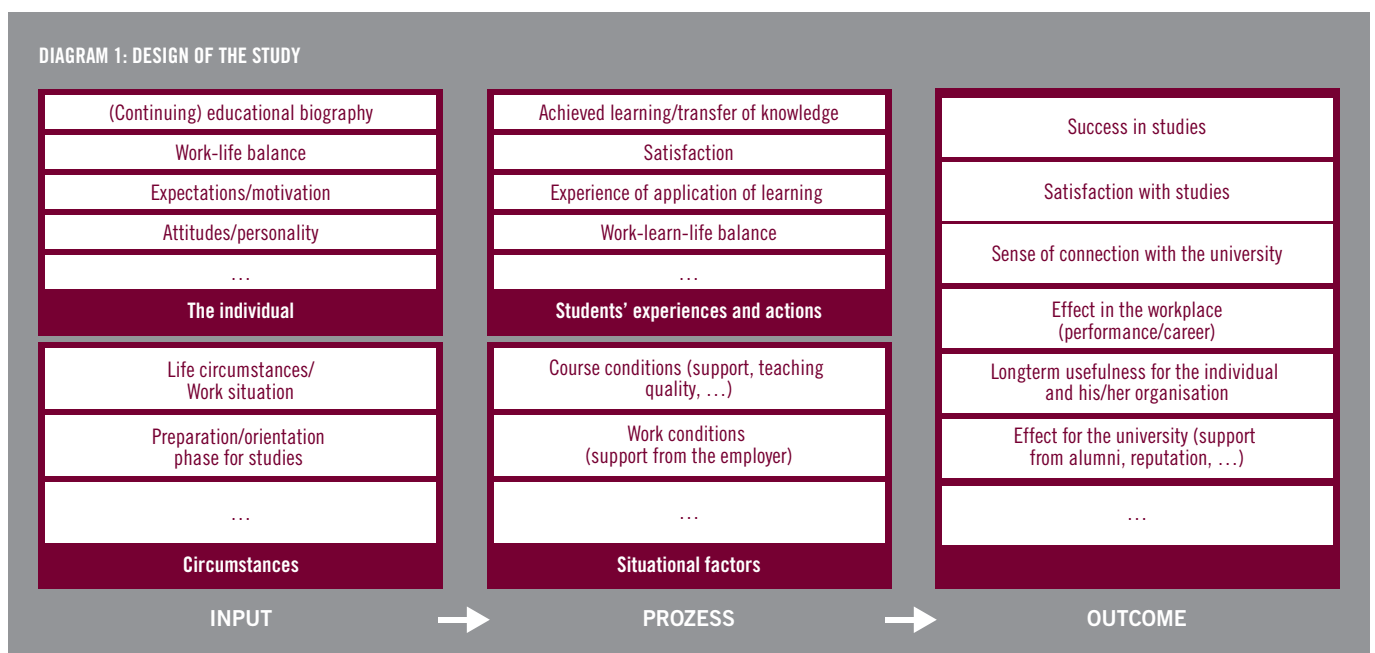
Success factors for studying parallel to work

Lifelong learning is becoming more and more established in German society as an integral component of education. For this reason it will become increasingly important for universities to react to the new challenges lifelong learning brings, and in particular those associated with the diversity of the student body. Universities must be open to the new types of students, must grapple seriously with the concept of diversity and must try to meet the needs of the different student groups in a considerably more targeted way.

Admittedly there is still very little definite information about the potential target groups, their backgrounds, age and family structures, living circumstances and previous qualifications. At the same time, their needs and expectations remain unclear. Also there is too little known about the personal and situational factors which can influence a student's success in university studies. What characteristics in a student influence the level of satisfaction and success they experience

in their studies? What types of support do students want offered and which are effective? Which teaching/learning methods best promote the transfer of knowledge? What expectations do the employers of working students have?

These and other questions have been tackled by a team at Leuphana University of Lüneburg for the past three years. Within the framework of the model project 'Open University Lower Saxony', the academic researchers have gathered data and findings about the characteristics of these new university target groups. The goal of the completed study was to fill the clear deficit of information regarding students in full time employment by gathering proven scientific data on the central factors influencing these students' success in their studies; from this knowledge, the researchers sought to draw recommendations for a targeted, and thereby sustainable, development and structuring of academic continuing education formats.



The following describes the methodological structure of the study and presents selected results.

Research methods

The core of the study comprised a longitudinal survey for which the students were interviewed using a standardised questionnaire at the beginning, in the middle and at the end of their studies. (See diagram 1). In this way it was possible to get a complete picture of how they proceeded through their studies, which included their expectations and goals when beginning their studies parallel to work, their experiences and difficulties during their studies and finally their retrospective review of their experience at the end. In contrast to comparable studies, data gathering methods in the Lüneburg study were not limited to written questionnaires, but the researchers added qualitative interviews with participating students to explore key themes more deeply. Furthermore, biographical information and data about students' qualifications were included in the analysis. Similarly, the students' achievements in the form of grades and credit points earned were taken into account. This wide variety of data sources allowed the researchers to make accurate observations of the experience of study-

ing parallel to work, by taking into consideration the numerous factors which influence study success.

Data set

For the purposes of this longitudinal study, questionnaires were given to 235 students studying parallel to full time work, enrolled in 6 different master's degree programs and 2 bachelor's programs at the Leuphana Professional School. The response rate was 80 percent of the total sample, representing a satisfactory sample group. For a control group, data was collected between May and June of 2012 from 269 students in full-time programs at Leuphana University as well as 32 participants in a wide range of adult education programs offered by the Association of Educational Initiatives of Lower Saxony. At the end of the investigation, the data sets included:

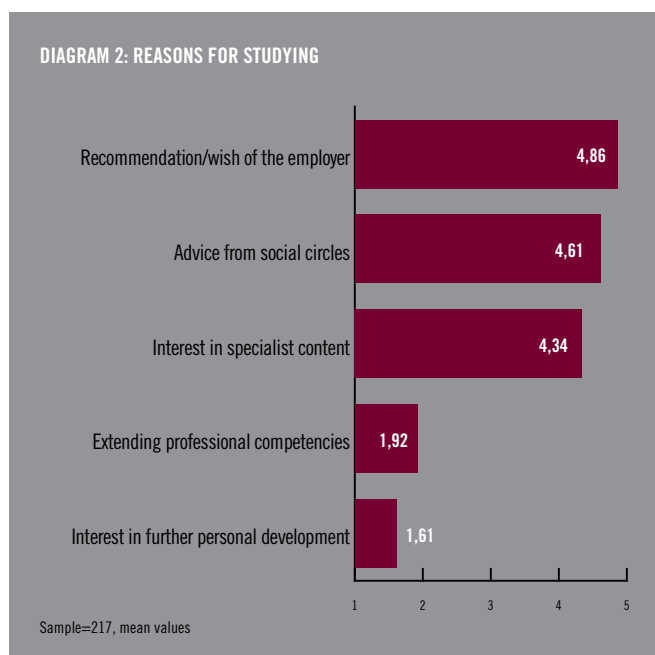
- 536 questionnaires from participants
- 32 qualitative interviews supporting key themes
- 102 resumes
- 58 items documenting grades and credit points

SELECTED RESULTS OF THE STUDY

During the ongoing evaluation of the comprehensive data, interesting results have already been observed. The following is a selection from the key findings.

What are the students' backgrounds?

In the questionnaires and interviews from the study, the students reveal themselves to be a highly heterogeneous group, with people of different ages and life circumstances coming together. Equally as varied are the professions and educational histories. That said, there are some interesting similarities: many of the students studying while in fulltime professions have very comprehensive continuing education biographies. Also, it is not rare among the sample for a student to have a professional or vocational qualification as well as a first degree. A further, common characteristic is a professional position at a managerial level. In fact, students in the programs tend to be mature professionals who have attained specialist and leadership positions.



Why study parallel to work?

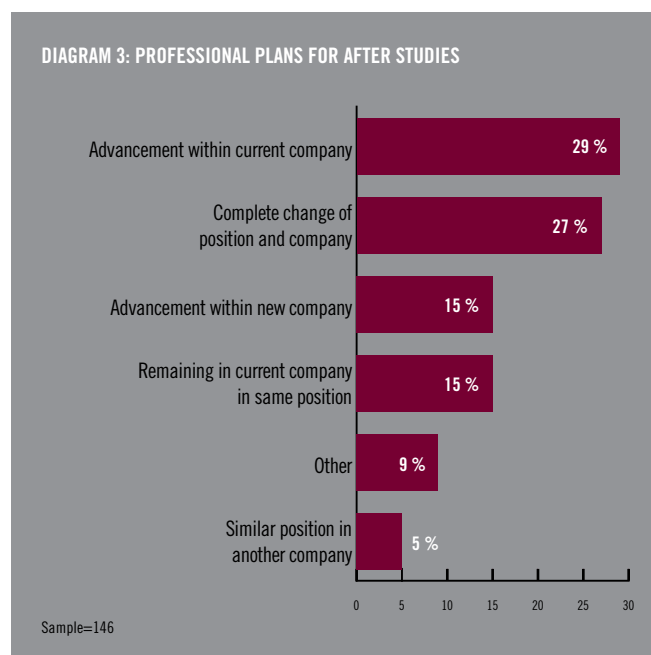
In the interviews, the students often spoke of sympathetic reactions from people in their private circles and of being asked, "Why are you putting yourself through this?" And yet, in most cases, these working students use careful tactics to manage their commitments and know exactly what goals and motives they have for pursuing continuing education.

Desire for further personal development

The reasons for deciding to study further are a mixture of students' specialist interests – the desire for further professional competencies – together with, above all, the wish for personal development (see diagram 2). For this reason, there is a great deal of intrinsic motivation behind their decision to pursue continuing education at a university alongside their ongoing careers.

Little impulse from employers

In contrast, students' social circles and their employers play an extremely small role in their motivation. This is also true for those students who



want to apply their newly-won competencies to the benefit of those same companies. Here the marked passivity of employers is clearly evident, who rather leave the pursuit of academic qualifications to their staff's own initiative and only seldom provide any impulse themselves.

Professional advancement as the goal

While the desire for individual fulfilment has an important role in the decision to study alongside work, it is not, as a rule, an end in itself. Much more important are clear professional goals (see diagram 3). In addition, a horizontal as well as a vertical mobility is apparent. In most cases, the wish for change is connected to the ambition to achieve a higher position in the current or in a new company.

Why university study instead of further professional training?

The choice to do a degree course was made by most of the participants right from the start. The interviews clarified why the interviewees had decided so clearly for a degree course and against further professional training. Thus, many students see a university degree as guaranteeing a particular level of educational quality, which would also be clear to an employer and therefore offers better career perspectives. In the interview, this was formulated by participants as follows:

“It is this new title which plays a role. Of course also the goal of setting myself apart from the rest....”the air is thinner at the top’.” – Student working towards her Master’s in Public Health: Prevention and Health Promotion, age 31

“Yes, if I sit down and study and take exams and so on for three years, then I would like it to be for something which will be properly recognised.” – Student working towards her Bachelor of Arts in Music in Childhood, age 41

Challenges of studying alongside a fulltime profession

The route to completing a degree is not without obstacles. In particular the time management and level of organisation required to combine

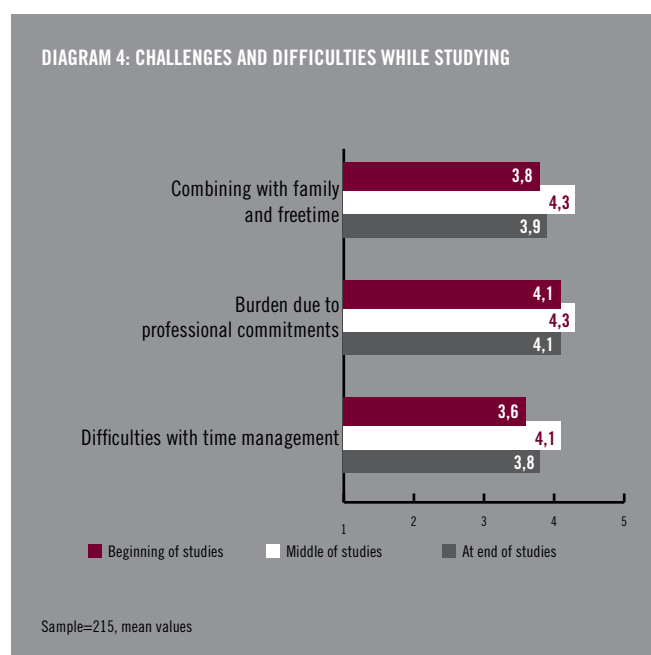
studies with other areas of life, the work-life-learn balance, turns out to be exceedingly difficult (see diagram 4). In fact, the longitudinal investigation clearly shows that students first perceive the multiple commitments to become especially problematical towards the middle of their studies.

A balancing act between job, private life and studies

Bachelor’s students seem to find, above all, writing academic papers is one of the bigger challenges. This could be due, on the one hand, to a lack of academic experience and, on the other, to the non-traditional university entrance methods applied largely for this group with their relatively shorter prior schooling.

Combining studies and parenting

When it comes to combining studying with family and freetime, it was possible to confirm that parents, and in particular mothers, feel considerably more burdened than childless students. However there was no correlation to the level of academic success or general sense of



satisfaction. Studying parallel to fulltime work seems in principle to be compatible with and appropriate to the role of a parent.

Older students have the same level of academic achievement

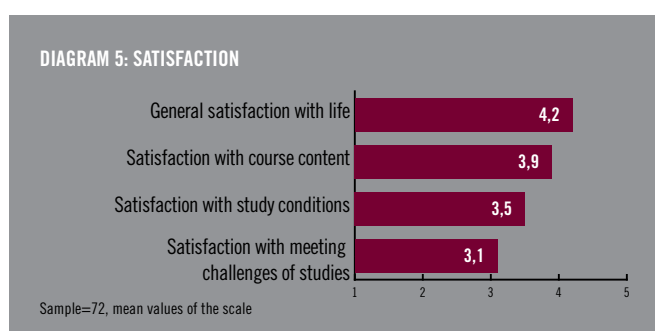
Older students more often express the difficulty of finding a stable study group. In addition, the challenges of examinations seem greater to older students than to their younger fellow students. However there is no meaningful difference in academic achievement between the various age groups.

Student satisfaction

In spite of sometimes finding the burdens great, overall the students are satisfied with their degree studies (see diagram 5). Men more often express criticism of the content and study conditions. Student age or a parenting role show no connection with the level of study satisfaction.

Satisfaction increases with age

Of particular interest was the fact that students who matriculated in 2011 expressed considerably more satisfaction with their studies than those in the previous year. This could suggest that with the benefit of accumulated experience, the structure of the still young program had been noticeably improved to better meet students' needs, and that student support services had become more professional.



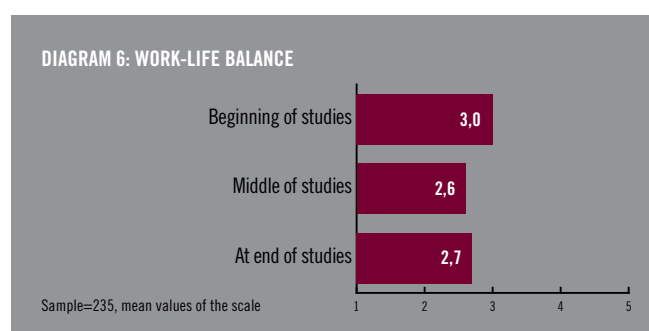
Work-life-learn balance

The students evaluated their overall work-life-learn balance at the beginning of their studies, and a close analysis clearly shows this balance falls apart in the middle of their studies (see diagram 6).

This is accompanied by the students' perceiving an increase in difficulty, as already described. It becomes obvious here that it is when the students are fully settled into their studies that they experience the full challenges. These increase to a level which can affect the balance of other areas of life. Once again, women are more affected than men. However, towards the end of their studies, the students' perception of this modifies and their life balance also improves slightly.

Better balance through decreased work hours

When the work-life balance is examined in the context of the person's overall circumstances while studying, it becomes clear that a better balance is often seen when working hours are less. Student satisfaction also has a close correlation with the work-life balance. In this context, how satisfied the student feels with how they managed the challenges is a clear indicator of a good balance. In addition, for students who said they find it quite easy to alternate between professional and private life, there is a stronger correlation with a better work-life balance.



Academic achievement and successful learning

University support has an important role in promoting the students' sense of satisfaction with their studies, but also their academic success. Students who experience positive support, more often make a higher subjective estimate of their learning success.

Stronger professional commitment linked to experiencing learning as more successful

In most cases, spending more time on studies does not seem to be connected with getting better grades. The survey reveals that students who give more time to their professional work, evaluate their learning success as higher. It is possible that their stronger professional involvement offers the possibility of a more effective transfer of learning to practice.

Self-regulating learners achieve better grades

Through the results of the study, it is not possible to identify any one special learning technique which leads those studying parallel to work to greater learning success. The results even indicate that students who believe strongly in revision get worse grades as a rule. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify promising study habits. For example, students who independently choose to explore topics more widely or deeply than their lecturers have required, more often achieve better grades than their less dedicated fellow students.

Balance in different areas of life versus academic performance

A successful balance between different areas of life often coincides with worse grades. Furthermore students with better work-life balance often experience less success in applying their learning to practice. It can be assumed that a certain amount of student commitment, with the associated sacrifices in other individual areas of life during their studies, definitely helps to achieve better academic success.

Comparison with traditional students

To better assess these results about the study habits and study success of people studying parallel to work, the study was followed by an analysis of whether and to what extent the personal characteristics of this group differ from those of so-called 'traditional' fulltime students.

Noticeable differences in life circumstances

The Leuphana Professional School students in fulltime work are, as expected, clearly older than the fulltime students in the Leuphana College and Graduate School. In addition, they obviously more often have stable partners or are married and more often have children. When their professional roles are also taken into account, it is clear that the life circumstances of the two groups are very different.

Professionals with better foundations for study success

When the personal characteristics relevant to studying are considered, significant differences can be found between the people studying alongside careers and the traditional fulltime students. Overall, these differences indicate relatively clearly that the traits required to successfully do a degree are more pronounced in the professional group than in the traditional students in the sample used for comparison.

The greater ability to cope with frustration, more satisfaction with life and an advantageous work-life balance are not accompanied by the desire to take things easy however: students in fulltime work are even more willing to commit time and effort to their studies than traditional students. All in all, through these results, the 'professionals' reveal themselves to be a group of students who – perhaps as the result of greater life experience – face the challenges of their studies (as well as their work and private lives) with greater composure and confidence and also, knowing exactly what their goals are, they are prepared to commit the effort needed.

CONCLUSION

It is, without a doubt, challenging to do a university degree parallel to work. The results of the study show, however, that such programs can be managed successfully with certain requirements of the student. The characteristics of successful students are a high level of professional commitment and the readiness to sacrifice or limit certain aspects of private life for the duration of their studies. The self-motivation to explore topics further than proscribed course content is also connected to study success. Therefore, the successful students are those committed and independent personalities who are ready to apply themselves to pursue their studies in order to realise ambitious professional goals.

Success is also not predicted by the age of students nor whether they are parents. The format of the examined programs are shown to be suited to people with very different life circumstances. The criteria for success are not primarily to do with students' circumstances, but what is paramount is personality. If the described characteristics for success are present, this university format is shown to be absolutely suited to providing fulltime professionals with lifelong learning and to promoting their career chances.

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