

Beate Binder, Ilona Pache

Gender – Knowledge – Participation. Professional Orientation and Career Paths of Gender Studies Graduates

1. Issues and Politico-Educational Context

In the following paper we would like to introduce an initial survey of graduates from the Gender Studies programme at Humboldt-Universität (HU). Subsequently, we will question how the graduates create opportunities for themselves to participate in chosen career areas.¹ We have collected accounts about studies and motives for studying, about entering professions, current occupations as well as career prospects. In doing so we were primarily interested in which qualification the graduates identify as well as what they had to say about the possibilities and limitations of incorporating knowledge gained in Gender Studies into different career areas.

By posing these questions, we hope to contribute to the current politico-educational discussion in Germany taking place within the discourse on the conditions and requirements of a knowledge society². In this debate we have determined two contradictions which are challenges (not only) for graduates of Gender Studies:

Firstly, we perceive a contradiction between subject oriented education processes (see Thiessen 2005: p. 252 ff.) and educational possibilities, which in a utilitarian way are oriented on the requirements of the labour market. Gaining knowledge is increasingly discussed with regards to the changing demands of the job market, while subject oriented education falls into the background. University education programmes are called on to orient themselves on the competency and qualification profiles demanded within the professional fields. In doing so, superficial competencies, so-called key qualifications, as well as the concept of “life long learning” become central to the goal of education³ in order to facilitate dealing with the contingency of bodies of knowledge and the processes of sudden social changes (see Thiessen 2005: p. 249).

Secondly, we note a contradiction between the emphasis on the necessity of transdisciplinary or interdisciplinary work and a joining of disciplines within the context of university course reforms. Thus, in their “Recommendations for Introducing New

¹ This article is an initial analysis of qualitative interviews with graduates from the HU Berlin’s Gender Studies program for the 5th European Conference on Gender Equality in Higher Education, Berlin 2007. The thesis like character has been retained for this publication.

² In using the term ‘knowledge society’ we are referring especially to Nowotny et. al. (2001), who emphasize the changed conditions of knowledge production and the more reflexive relations between knowledge, academia and society for current knowledge based societies, whereby the contextualization of knowledge is central to its evaluation and use.

³ This discussion was taken up intensively within the context of the Bologna Process’ university course reforms which were implemented European-wide.

Course Structures” (2000: p. 21) the German Science and Humanities Council predicted, in addition to the subject qualifications, an increasing demand for transferable and non-specialized competencies and particularly recommended that inter- and transdisciplinary competencies be conveyed. Nonetheless, within the daily workings of universities this seems more like rhetoric than a maxim.

Both aspects play a central role in Gender Studies in Germany. On the one hand, inter- and transdisciplinarity is named as one of the key characteristics of Women’s and Gender Studies (see Kahlert 2001). On the other hand, Gender Studies are perceived as an identity project (see e.g., Schmidbaur 2005). This means that a subject oriented educational concern seems to determine the motivation of the students. We therefore asked how these challenges are perceived by students or graduates and how they describe the possibilities of developing individual orientations for combining their studies and career wishes within the frame of these contradicting demands.

2. Follow-up Surveys: State of Research and our Epistemological Interests

Comprehensive follow-up surveys are still being prepared in Germany. Currently a quantitative study about graduates from the Gender Studies programme is being conducted at the Humboldt-Universität.⁴ In Germany, there has been only one such study, completed within the context of an EU study on the employability of graduates from Women’s Studies (see Griffin 2002). Schmidbaur (2005), who interviewed graduates from diverse German universities and colleges primarily focusing on gender in various disciplines, determined that graduates from Women’s and Gender Studies are found to work in the same fields as other social sciences and humanities graduates. Secondly, she also found that contrary to expectations, knowledge gained in Gender Studies was highly relevant to occupations with a tendency for this to increase and thirdly, that there were difficulties with accepting the qualifications (see Schmidbaur 2005: p. 290, p. 293). Obviously, it can be concluded from this research that programmes in Gender Studies convey key competencies in the traditional academic sense, but also additional “gender competencies”. How the concept of “gender competence” is to be taken up content-wise or established disciplinarily (see Thiessen 2005: p. 269) still has to be specified – especially with regards to concrete career areas. How graduates incorporate their “gender knowledge” into their professional practices, especially in “gender-distant or indifferent” areas and how these practices vary in different professional areas (each of which have their own job profiles) remains especially open for Schmidbaur.

Following Schmidbaur (2005), we also assume that during the course of studies, students gain not only abilities and proficiencies which strengthen their professional agency, but that they also (are able to) realize their own interests. It is generally to

⁴ This survey was conducted by students under the direction of Christine Bauhardt and aims to comprehensively collect the career paths of graduates of the HU Berlin’s Gender Studies program.

be expected that the course of studies as an identity project intersects with it as a form of gaining knowledge, whereby it needs to be questioned how personal orientation and interests as well as various engagements, (also) in areas external to the university, structure the education process. Moreover, it also has to be considered how professional agency is ultimately attained through the development of comprehensive competencies.

Accordingly, we understand the concept of professional agency as being multifaceted and initially pursue Barbara Thiessen's subject centred model (2005), which differentiates between subject area competencies, methodical competencies, social competencies and individual competencies. Nevertheless, these four dimensions are primarily individually cognitively conceptualized in Thiessen's model. In contrast we think that competencies first gain relevance when they for example can be implemented and realized in the social space of professional practices. We therefore recommend an action oriented perspective, which emphasizes practices (agency).

In doing so we make **two assumptions**: First of all different knowledge practices are needed in order to be able to successfully act within the context of changed job profiles and to deal with the contingency of knowledge. From the perspective of the Gender Studies graduates, the phrase "knowledge society" means that they have to develop **specific knowledge practices** in order to create room to manoeuvre within the changing job market.

Secondly, each of the fields of work in which the graduates want to enter follow their own logic and thus also require different approaches. Accordingly, it can also be expected that the **quality of the participation** in diverse fields of work varies: First, in the sense of the possibilities for incorporating knowledge gained specifically in Gender Studies and second, in the sense which graduates described as wanting to produce "consistency" between professional requirements and subjective demands. With the term "consistency" we mean all of the considerations and efforts made in order to balance ones own (socially critical) attitudes and wishes for social interventions with the demands of the work place and/or fields.

Our qualitative analysis is linked to the following considerations: Up to now, we have interviewed six graduates of the HU Gender Studies program, whereby, as previously mentioned, in addition to experiences of these graduates in different fields of work, we were interested especially in the practices that they developed – in view of their education in Gender Studies – in order to make areas of work accessible.⁵

In choosing our interview partners, we aimed to depict the diversity of career areas, in which Gender Studies graduates are engaged. Specifically, we interviewed:

⁵ Please note: At the time of the survey (summer semester 2007) the Magister program had already existed at the HU (both as a major and a minor) for almost ten years and the Bachelor program for two years. There were 548 students enrolled, from which 402 were in the Magister program and 146 were in the Bachelor program. Moreover, 135 Magister students and one Bachelor student had completed their studies.

- a research assistant working in a university study about software development processes,
- a program editor for a public broadcasting service,
- an academic assistant at a university,
- an NGO employee,
- a curatorial assistant, and
- a future employee of a trans-nationally active business.

3. Initial Theses and Preliminary Results

Corresponding to the explorative character of our research, our results are preliminary and are based on an initial analysis of our interviews. We have organized our analysis according to the phases: university studies and career entry.

3.1 University Studies

In the graduates' accounts, their studies represent a realm of possibilities from which they choose according to their interests and motivations. In the retrospective descriptions, triggered through our focusing on career entry and experiences, the graduates reconstructed from their perspective what was perceived as "useful" or what they themselves saw as important in their chosen fields of work, orientation, experiences and decisions during their university studies.

In the following presentation of this initial analysis, we orient ourselves on the above mentioned model from Thiessen (see 2005: p. 256 ff.), however we would like to emphasize – with Thiessen – that the division into different levels of competency is primarily a heuristic procedure, whereas in daily experience the individual dimensions interact. To begin with, we were able to determine that the specific philosophy of the HU Gender Studies program permeates, although to varying degrees, all areas of competency. We can however, only hint at the main features of this philosophy here: Included among these are disciplinary subjects – dimensions and effects of the category of gender – and the four profile areas: transdisciplinarity, intersectionality, critical scholarship and intervention⁶. In addition, the teaching at the university is influenced by an extensively reflexive attitude towards subjects and learning processes.

In the domain of **subject area competencies**, the interdisciplinary approach to studies, which plays a central role in the Gender Studies program at the HU, was described by the interviewed graduates as extremely critical with respect to their professional abilities.

In the interviews, the following abilities were especially emphasized:

⁶ With intervention we are referring here to the connection between practice and application of the acquired knowledge in teaching and learning projects as well as in various internships in Germany and abroad

- identifying issues and related questions,
- opening every possible body of knowledge from a gender perspective,
- dealing with divergent disciplinary perspectives, concepts and approaches,
- formulating questions which challenge disciplinary and/or established perspectives of the issues.

We summarize these discipline based abilities as **practices for accumulating and generating knowledge**.

In the domain of **methodical competencies**, the graduates conveyed in particular their explicit orientation on desired career areas and/or on strengthening their employment abilities. This wish is used to justify changing their second concentration from the humanities to a technical subject while completing their Magister and in particular for specializing their methodical approach in their fourth and fifth year courses, e.g., to discourse analysis or social scientific empiricism. In addition to learning concrete methods, the ability to reflect about knowledge is mentioned as one of the competencies gained during their course of studies.

Furthermore, the graduates mention:

- above all, having the fundamental proficiencies necessary for scholarly work,
- very frequently, being able to reflect about the possibilities and limits of gaining knowledge,
- realizing that researchers and knowledge are always situated in a socio-historical context,
- being able to critically reflect about discipline based views and foregone conclusions,
- being able to link bodies of knowledge from different fields,
- being able to reinterpret one's own weaknesses (compensating for a lack of knowledge through abilities, recognizing the particularities of knowledge).

We summarize these methodical abilities as **practices for reflecting about oneself and knowledge**.

In the domain of **social competencies**, the graduates especially mention experiences from various social contexts which are integrated into the course of studies. They experience as students the relevance of “gender knowledge” and develop abilities for applying the knowledge gained during their studies through their internships, within the Tutorial Project⁷ as well as by studying abroad.

Abilities were mentioned such as:

- integrating “gender knowledge” into internships,

⁷ The Tutorial Project is a form of interdisciplinary, self organized studying established at the HU. See http://lehre.hu-berlin.de/cgi-bin/index.cgi?page=studienreform_projekttutorien (last accessed March 3, 2008).

- conducting a self-organized tutorial project including a publication,
- increasing self-confidence while studying abroad.

Nonetheless, the stigmatisation of this subject area as well as the pressure to legitimize oneself as a gender student was frequently discussed. The graduates interpret these experiences as a structural weakness regarding the position of the field in the public. It became clear in the accounts that it was necessary to reflect on these experiences and develop not only debating abilities, but also ways of dealing with disparaging comments in different contexts.

Graduates of the Gender Studies program thus develop techniques for transferring the abilities and knowledge gained in their studies into different contexts. Furthermore, they develop strategies for incorporating and/or defending themselves and their own stances and perspectives. This as well as the application of their disciplinary abilities can be perceived as an intervention into the functioning and logic of professional fields.

These social abilities we summarize as **practices for transferring and intervening**.

In the domain of **individual competencies**, the graduates reported which possibilities they chose in order to pursue their epistemological interests and to develop their own profile. Students frequently perceive their organizational skills, which are generally increased through the specific course of Gender Studies, as one of their strengths. Moreover, it was emphasized that abilities to determine one's own interests were both required and supported by the Gender Studies program and could be further expanded upon. This process of developing oneself, including positions which are socially critical as well as critical of knowledge, is at the same time closely interwoven by the graduates with a sense of reality oriented on the logic of the desired career areas. Their orientation on producing "consistency" results from this. Attempts are made to bring the professional requirements of the chosen fields as much as possible into accordance with their own desires and positions: Developing visions, pursuing their own interests and shooting for the top – included in this is a thoroughly ambivalent and contradictory hotch-potch, which accompanies a constant reflection of (career) decisions. This is especially visible when the graduates discuss their wishes for the future. It was clear that they were looking for opportunities to pursue their own interests and to help create work areas i.e., to generally expand their participation. At the same time though, they very carefully and soberly weigh the realm of possibilities within the areas of work.

We summarize these individual abilities as **practices of identity based professionalization**.

3.2 Career Entry

It was obvious that all of the interviewees were already strongly oriented on their careers during their studies and not because they had to finance their studies. At the same time, this lead them to extensively invest their time in internships, in limited work relationships as well as in university external and political projects. In many

cases this created a course of studies, which in regard to the choice of lectures as well as choice of topic for their thesis work, was oriented on their desired professional field. Generally, knowledge about how areas of work function was gained and networks critical to their actual career entry were developed.

How relevant the methods or competencies gained while studying are for the graduates' career entry is dependent on the areas in which they work. The interviewees indicated this in that they developed context specific knowledge practices in order to open up possibilities within their career. The methods that we defined in the four areas of competencies (see above) were continuously touched upon. Nonetheless, the different areas of work each have their own specific quality of participation. Whether or not the Gender Studies graduates perceived themselves explicitly as protagonists endowed with disciplinary and methodical gender competencies, was also strongly dependent on whether the logic of the work context explicitly acknowledged the reflexive quality of "gender knowledge". Depending on the degree of "gender knowledge" acceptance, we would like to differentiate the areas of work as "gender open", "gender indifferent" and "gender resistant":

In **"gender open" work areas** the competencies gained through the Gender Studies program are directly required, a prerequisite and/or appreciated. In such areas Gender Studies graduates can extensively integrate their abilities. A graduate, for example, who was working in a university research project, which was studying the inscribing of gender in software development, used methodical abilities in order to reconstruct gender concepts that flow into modelling decisions. A further example is found in the area of human resource management in a transnational company that strives to improve qualification processes. Knowledge of different gender based data polling with regards to the performance of males and female high school graduates is decisive there.

In **"gender-indifferent" work areas** gender explicit knowledge plays a minor role. In these areas graduates find that being competent in more general areas of academia is more important and place these in the foreground. For example an employee of an NGO, which supports educating youth, emphasizes her scholarly writing abilities. Furthermore, she reports that her gender competencies are specifically requested when there are conflicts regarding equality ("gender brigade"). The curatorial assistant refers to her research and debating skills as areas of competency that are generally required, but also underlines her ability to be critical of knowledge and her competency in interdisciplinary work which she learned specifically in Gender Studies.

In **"gender resistant" work areas** the competencies developed through the Gender Studies program contradict the "logic" of the work context and/or dominant protagonist in the work context. The academic assistant complained about the unclear academic career possibilities for someone graduating from Gender Studies (see also Kahlert 2005). The employee who was working in the media field experienced an internal conflict when she was unable to bring her individual convictions, devel-

oped during her participation in the Gender Studies program, into agreement with the professional demands of a dominant protagonist.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

Against the backdrop of these initial findings, we would like to recommend that future research regarding the employment opportunities of Gender Studies graduates focus on the practices or processes and the respective quality of participation in the respective areas of work. At the same time, it needs to be open to: how the education goals of the Gender Studies programme corresponds with the job market's requirements and especially how graduates bring or try to bring these requirements into agreement with their subjective orientations and desires. In this way the potential of Gender Studies to critically reflect about society and knowledge as well as its potential to intervene in society comes into focus and thus too that which the students present as an orientation on "consistency". Without doubt, the interdisciplinary course of studies strengthens the knowledge oriented self-reflexivity. With regards to the critical and reflexive abilities gained during the course of studies, it can already be seen in the accounts we highlighted here that the respective work areas offer very different ranges of possibilities for implementing them. It remains to be asked within this context whether the "gender open" work areas are also ones which have already incorporated the structural logic of the knowledge society i.e., a general scientification as well as increasing complexity and uncertainty of knowledge (see Nowotny et al. 2001), or, whether they are in a state of transforming towards it.

References

- Griffin, Gabriele (Ed.) 2002: Womens Employment, Women's Studies, and Equal Opportunities 1945-2001. Reports from Nine European Countries. Hull/UK
- Kahlert, Heike 2005: Wissenschaftsentwicklung durch Inter- und Transdisziplinarität. Positionen der Frauen- und Geschlechterforschung. In: Kahlert, Thiessen, Weller (Eds.) 2005: p. 23-60
- Kahlert, Heike/Thiessen, Barbara/Weller, Ines (Eds.) 2005: Quer denken – Strukturen verändern. Gender Studies zwischen Disziplinen. Oldenburg
- Notwotny, Helga/Scott, Peter/ Gibbons, Michael 2001: Re-Thinking Science. Knowledge and the Public in an Age of Uncertainty, Cambridge
- Schmidbaur, Marianne 2005: Gender Studies und Professionalisierung, Beschäftigungsfähigkeit und Beschäftigungsaussichten von Studierenden und Absolvent_innen der Frauen- und Geschlechterstudien/Gender Studies. In: Kahlert, Thiessen, Weller (Eds.) 2005: p. 275-300
- Thiessen, Barbara 2005: Inter- und Transdisziplinarität als Teil beruflicher Handlungskompetenzen. Gender Studies als Übersetzungswissen. In: Kahlert, Thiessen, Weller (Eds.) 2005: p. 249-274
- Wissenschaftsrat 2000: Empfehlungen zur Einführung neuer Studienstrukturen und -abschlüsse (Bakkalaureus/Bachelor – Magister/Master) in Deutschland.