

**Paper from Learners' Perspective on Trade Unions (Kooperationsstelle)
at the Carl von Ossietzky University Oldenburg**

Carl von Ossietzky University of Oldenburg & Arbeit und Leben

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1. General Introduction

In Lower Saxony there is the possibility for workers/employees to enter university without A-Level-education; this opportunity is therefore open to union members, too. In order to enter university, these people will have to take special university entry examinations. In preparation for these examinations **ARBEIT und LEBEN** offers courses in cooperation with the university preparing these people for their (1st) General Certificate (**A-Part**) and then for the (2nd) Special Certificate (**B-Part**).

General Certificate (A-Part)

Within these special courses people are trained to gain skills and abilities needed for exams and later studies; acquired qualifications will be tested at university to see if people are capable of studying at university level.

Special Certificate (B-Part)

Having passed all the exams they will have to take further exams related to the subject they wish to study – subjects which can be studied at universities, colleges, academies.

2. Course provision

In preparation of the **A-Part**, ARBEIT und LEBEN organizes courses related to subjects needed for the examination including content-oriented materials. ARBEIT und LEBEN provides teachers qualified to teach at an adult level applying methods relevant for this particular target group. They also choose subjects (amongst others) which relate to previous experiences either during their job-life or otherwise.

For some time ARBEIT und LEBEN has been offering online-supported teaching.

The following prerequisites for taking the exams for the A-Part have to be fulfilled:

People must have

- served and finished an apprenticeship and two years of working within that trade or occupation or in a related trade or occupation

or

- served and finished an apprenticeship and been working for three years in different vocational areas

or

- done full time vocational work similar and comparable to the trained trade or occupation

or

- spent five years running a home independently in combination with having been responsible for the upbringing of at least one child or for the caring of at least one dependent person

and

- had their main place of residence in Lower Saxony for the past 12 months

3. The Learners' Perspective

In order to describe experiences from the views of learners, former participants from our courses were interviewed – their real names have been changed.

Susanne (newly married), no children, left school at the age of 16 and spent 2 ½ years serving an apprenticeship to become a Legal Assistant. Susanne spent 20 years working as Legal Assistant but neither a rise to a higher position nor mental and financial enrichment was in sight – she had reached a dead end. This realization prompted her finally to make other plans, hoping for progress in her own intellectual working life and personal development and more interesting prospects in her future.

After searching for opportunities she came across ARBEIT und LEBEN's advertisements informing about the possibility for people without A-Level-education to study at the university. After having been informed she decided to attend the course offered and very eagerly began to look forward towards the set aim. Not giving up her 8-hour-job she attended evening classes from 6.30 p.m. – 10 p.m. four evenings a week.

Meeting the requirements within the course was not difficult for her. Susanne was attentive and diligent but the amount of work (including home work) moved her sometimes to the edge of her strength. In her opinion, the duration of the course should have been extended – she just felt short of time, particularly with regard to the preparation of the oral exam. Nevertheless, she passed her exams with an overall mark of 1,7 p. which is almost "very good". She admits having a high demand on herself but was satisfied with her overall result.

After entering university (with the aim of eventually becoming a teacher at a vocational school) her enthusiasm died down. She felt disappointed because her hopes of intellectual personal progress failed very quickly, mainly due to the rather strictly devised curriculum at university since the introduction of the Bachelor degree. The vast number of exams within a short time make it necessary to learn mostly off by heart – a "learning-method" she resents because one learns solely for the exam and forgets again (like at school). She misses time for her own research and she misses the attention and support from professors and people in charge. According to her, studies consist mainly of listening to lectures. Her subjects are Economics, Pedagogy and Politics and she is entirely disillusioned with Economics and Pedagogy. Her hopes for new and interesting prospects in her life have reached a rather low level, so far.

Ruth, married with four children, two of them (now teenagers) live at home with their parents, completed Secondary education and served an apprenticeship to become a Dental Assistant. She had spent several years working as a Dental Assistant when she decided to get engaged in working in the field of biological agriculture, a job which proved to be easier to combine family work with earning money.

Not really satisfied with her educational standard, she decided to attend evening classes to reach A-Level-standard. It was her strong desire to become a student at university. During that time she

found she was neglecting her children and did not continue with the evening classes; she felt very disappointed with herself.

A long time passed and three years ago the possibility of acquiring a university entrance qualification through being prepared by ARBEIT und LEBEN came to her attention. She went to the information meeting, felt very enthusiastic about the new possibility of still having the chance of going to university. So she booked the course there and then – at last one of the greatest desires seemed to be possible to materialize. She would have liked to aim at studying Theology but was discouraged because of the time it would take to finish.

During the time of preparation, Ruth was very eager to learn. She was ambitious, enthusiastic and enjoyed learning. In her view there was a lot of material to cope with but this gave her the appropriate tools for studying at university. The materials and subjects used during the course were in her opinion interesting and motivated her own research but the amount was sometimes too much. Nonetheless, she was very lucky because her husband supported her and relieved the strain as much as he could. Finally she passed all her exams to her satisfaction and started studying nearly a couple of years ago finding everything very interesting and motivating.

During the first semester she felt a little inhibited about her age but during the second semester she was beginning to become relaxed. Learning and understanding theories, terminologies, structuring the amount of work, materials and subjects became increasingly easier as she was becoming more self-confident. Her only criticism is the tight structure of the curriculum which leaves hardly any time for her own research and makes the combination between university studies and family life very difficult.

Ruth is studying Social Sciences (Politics and Sociology) and Pedagogy and in her experience she is receiving every support she needs from her professors and people in charge. There is also a good supply of materials which helps enormously. Studying for her is the fulfilment of a dream.

Speaking with Ruth, I was reminded of my own development which started with ARBEIT und LEBEN a very long time ago. I also had four children to bring up when I started on my way to fulfil my dream – and it wasn't easy. Yet, I grew and continued to grow, becoming more confident and stronger as I went along. I very much value having had the chance of studying at university – it's a privilege – and besides being mother to my children, studying at university was the best time of my life!

Gudrun Perrotton
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