



An Overview about the German Educational System

Lisa Fidler

Bielefeld University, Faculty of Educational Science, Universitätsstraße 25, D-33615 Bielefeld, Germany,
lisa.fidler@uni-bielefeld.de
Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences, Faculty of Social Education, Social Education Department,
Studentų St. 39, LT-08106 Vilnius, Lithuania, Socrates Student

The aim of this article is to give an introduction about how the German educational system is organized. In the beginning I will describe our school system which is quite complicated due to the fact that Germany is divided into 16 federal states (we call them “Bundesländer”) and each “Bundesland” has its own constitution and a more or less different school system. In the following part, I will outline the most important facts of our higher educational system and will combine them with my own experiences.

In Germany we have a compulsory school attendance law (“Schulpflicht”) which means that children have to attend school from the age of 6 until the age of 15. Preschool education is not part of the public educational system. Kindergartens often belong to church organizations and social institutions. Primary school starts at the age of 6. In most states it lasts for 4 years (in two, Berlin and Brandenburg, for six years). After primary school, there are different secondary school tracks where students and parents can choose from, depending on the student educational performance in primary school:

1. The **Hauptschule** is the lowest and last demanding vocational track. It qualifies for work in trades and industrial employment.
2. The **Realschule** is a higher and the most popular vocational track.
3. The **Gymnasium** is the academic track which leads to qualification for university (“Abitur”).
4. The **Gesamtschule** combines all tracks above¹.

¹ Goethe-Institut e.V. [website]. (2017). [accessed 28 March 2017]. Available at: <http://www.goethe.de/lrn/prj/wnd/idl/sua/sys/deindex.htm>.

Our school system has often been criticized for being a selective “three-class-system”. *Gymnasium* is for the bright children of academic families, *Realschule* for the ones in the middle who still have the chance to switch to *Gymnasium* once they have successfully finished *Realschule* and *Hauptschule* for the bottom tier. At the age of 10 children are put into one of these tracks and once they are in one track they usually stay there, means their future perspectives are determined at a very young age. Some might change from *Realschule* to *Gymnasium* but it doesn’t happen that often. Changing from *Gymnasium* to *Realschule* is more common².

After primary school I went to *Gymnasium*. While in primary school in my class we had lots of children from middle- and upper-class and lower-class families and with a migration background, in *Gymnasium* it was different. More children from middle- and upper-class families visit the *Gymnasium* than children from lower-class families and immigrant children are less successful than their German classmates. Schools often fail to guarantee sufficient support for those children³.

Bad results in PISA rankings (especially those in 2000) have shown that the German educational system struggles to provide successful learning environments. Many times there have been attempts to improve it, like creating more comprehensive schools to replacing the other three divided tracks but until now the *Gesamtschule* just co-exists with the other three school forms. There have been changes made in structure as well, like introducing new school books, new teaching methods and curricula⁴. Since 2000 the German results in PISA rankings have improved but still remain low compared to leading countries like Singapore and Finland⁵.

Students with special needs are put into special schools (“Förderschulen”). Since Germany has signed the *UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* in 2008 there have been attempts to create inclusive schools (to integrate children with disabilities in classes with children without disabilities). During the last years quite a few regular schools turned into inclusive schools but to create an extensive inclusive education system more financial support and better trained staff is needed⁶.

For studying at an university students need an “Abitur” diploma. Available study places are awarded due to the grade of the school leaving examination grades. Many subjects have a “Numerus Clausus” (Latin for ‘closed number’), so the number of places

² OECD [website]. (2016). [accessed 07 April 2017]. Available at: http://www.keepeek.com/Digital-Asset-Management/oeed/education/bildung-auf-einen-blick-2016_9789264264212-de#.W0dBb1GGM2w#page6.

³ BMBF (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung) [website]. (2017). [accessed 28 March 2017]. Available at: <https://www.bmbf.de/de/bildung-in-deutschland-2016-3010.html>.

⁴ Deutscher Bildungsserver [website]. (2017). [accessed 28 March 2017]. Available at: <http://www.bildungs-server.de/Gesamtueberblick-zum-deutschen-Bildungssystem-506.html>.

⁵ OECD [website]. (2015). [accessed 07 April 2017]. Available at: <http://www.oecd.org/berlin/themen/pisa-studie/>.

⁶ UNESCO [website] (2017). [accessed 07 April 2017]. Available at: <https://www.unesco.de/bildung/inklusive-bildung/inklusive-bildung-deutschland.html>.

is limited. The NC is an average grade that must be met for admission. But there are subjects without a NC as well, like physics or chemistry. For most of the subjects there are no extra entry exams but for subjects like medicine, music, art, sport or languages there might be some admission tests⁷. Some study programs might require motivation letters (this was the case for my Master Program) or selection interviews as well.

Starting in 2005, in several “Bundesländern” tuition fees of 500 Euros per semester were introduced, followed by mass protests and citizens’ initiatives. Most of the states dropped them later, with Lower Saxony as the last state in 2014. In my state, North Rhine-Westphalia, there were study fees from the winter term 2006/2007 until the summer term 2011. Luckily I started my studies in 2012. So nowadays in Germany there are no tuitions fees, even for international students, anymore. We study almost for free, we only have to pay a semester fee between 150 € to 300 € per semester⁸. It includes a semester ticket which means that we can use public transportation in the “Bundesland” we study in for free. As public transportation is quite expensive in Germany it is such a great thing. Once I will finish my studies this will be a thing very much missed.

I study at Bielefeld University. In total we are around 25.000 students, including over 1.700 students from 100 different countries⁹. The university was top-ranked in many research areas like in the humanities and social sciences and got awards for excellent teaching. For example in the nationwide competition “Initiative for excellent teaching” Bielefeld University was one of six universities in Germany that was awarded a prize for a unique teaching and study culture. The library was ranked second-best in Germany in the Centre for Higher Education (CHE)-ranking¹⁰. There are lots of different degree programs and during our studies we can individually put together our modules from a multitude of courses. In my Master I usually can choose between 2 to 5 classes or even more and can create my one individual subsidiary subjects based on my personal interests.

For international students there are many great services like helping in finding a place to stay, planning the studies, leisure actives and a mentor program. The university has lots of partner universities all around the world which makes it easy to go abroad for one or two semesters¹¹. But it makes it hard to choose a destination as there are so many possibilities, too. For me getting an Erasmus placement was pretty easy. My faculty, the faculty of Educational Science, offers five places for Lithuania but as I was the only one

⁷ DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) [website] (2017). [accessed 28 March 2017]. Available at: <https://www.study-in.de/en/>.

⁸ xStudy SE [website]. (2017). [accessed 07 April 2017]. Available at: <https://studieren.de/studium-studien-gebuehren.0.html>.

⁹ Bielefeld University [website]. (2017). [accessed 07 April 2017]. Available at: https://uni-bielefeld.de/UEber_uns/zahlen_daten.html.

¹⁰ World University Ranking [website]. (2017). [accessed 07 April 2017]. Available at: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/universitat-bielefeld#ranking-dataset/589595>.

¹¹ Bielefeld University [website]. (2017). [accessed 28 March 2017]. Available at: [http://www.uni-bielefeld.de/\(en\)/index_international.html](http://www.uni-bielefeld.de/(en)/index_international.html)

who applied I got the place without any problems. All in all I feel like that not so many students go on Erasmus. In my whole Master Program I only know one other girl who is on Erasmus now, in Sweden. So far my Erasmus has been great; it just appears that different countries seem to receive different amounts of Erasmus scholarship for being in Lithuania while the German scholarship seems to be the lowest one which just covers my costs for housing.

Nevertheless I think going on Erasmus is completely worth it, although I get less money than others. The experiences you will make, the friends you will find, the places you will see will last for a lifetime.