

Working Life Relevance

in Norwegian discipline-oriented programmes; Knowledge status and student perceptions

By

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Introduction: the issue and its background

One of the aims of the Bologna process states that all degrees must have a real qualification for working life. In this connection, 'discipline' programmes¹ have come under debate in Norway. In fact, there are two partly related debates running simultaneously: One about the often heard allegation that discipline programmes are mainly designed for preparing their students for academic and research careers, with little or no working life orientation; another debate goes about over-qualification: representatives of employer organisations have argued that while employers are often well served with bachelor recruits, an inflationary drift towards the masters level has created a kind of 'mastermania' among educators and the students themselves. If the former allegation is true, this must be of concern even for prospective MA candidates, of whom roughly 90 per cent will actually end up in jobs outside academia. What then about the bachelors, with the same orientation but a thinner and less in-depth curriculum? In this paper, we look at how discipline studies in Norway relate to working life on the basis of recent research literature and the perceptions and attitudes of students on these programmes who were surveyed this spring.

Before the higher education reform in 2002 the lower degree (cand. mag.) in theoretical discipline studies, in addition to being the first steps towards an academic career, had a clear orientation towards teacher qualification for secondary schools. The degree took some four and a half years to complete and contained at least three subjects equivalent to 60 ECTS or more. An added course in pedagogics completed a teacher education, while the higher degree added a further 1.5 – 2-year specialisation (with a thesis) on top of a 90-credit subject from the lower degree, qualifying for teaching positions in upper secondary schools. The reform in 2002 reorganised most of Norwegian higher education in accordance with the Bologna BA – MA – PhD formula. While working life relevance at the lower degree level was a serious concern in the work leading up to the new act, the law itself actually fails to mention this aspect among the overarching aims for higher education. The post-reform BA degree in discipline studies now has in-depth specialisation in a single subject (typically 80 or 90 ECTS), with support and elective courses surrounding it. Whatever else is gained, the former all-important link with the school system is more or less broken, since teacher education for all levels now follows specially designed MA programmes. And whereas the subjects of the old cand. mag. were typically designed to fit the needs of school subjects (Norwegian, English, mathematics, etc.) today's programmes are typically much more discipline-specific, and often esoteric when seen from the schools' point of view (e.g. literature studies, linguistics, development geography, biodiversity).

This all means that most of today's students in discipline-oriented programmes find themselves competing in a much more unspecified job market outside the education sector (although some of them of course become teachers). What are they actually educated for? Where do their qualifications stand in this new context? And particularly: how do the BA candidates fare, with less depth in terms of skills and knowledge? Qualifications enough – and yet too little? These debates on relevance and job opportunities have taken place against a general backdrop of an alleged 'crisis in the humanities' – and partly also in mathematics. A crisis, that is, not in quality but in recruitment and 'position'.

¹ By 'discipline programmes' we mean programmes that do not explicitly aim at specific professions or job domains.

Current knowledge status

Working life relevance in Norwegian higher education was for a long time a neglected topic, with the exception of NIFU's long-running MA candidate survey. During the last decade, however, some studies and evaluation projects have shed more light on the issue, including the position of the discipline-based programmes. Last year NOKUT produced a report (Kantardjiev and Haakstad, 2015) that also summed up the findings of recent literature. Most of the information was obtained from reports by OECD (2009), Rambøll Management Consulting (2007), FAFO/NIFU-STEP (2008), NIFU (2016) and NOKUT (2010; 2011; 2012, 2015), including NOKUT's annual (since 2013) National Student Survey². Some of these reports also record interviews with HE teachers and employers and presents some information that was obtained from a scan of NOKUT's quality assurance reports.

Judging from these sources, the overall situation seems far from bleak. OECD's latest report on Norway (OECD, 2009) mentions the good correspondence that exists between education and the job market, although improving 'the system's responsiveness to the needs of society and the economy' is also recommended in the conclusion. In surveys among teachers and students, working life relevance typically comes out positively. HE teachers are generally very content with this aspect of their provision, and their students even more so: In the different student surveys (e.g. *Studiebarometeret*, 2015) working life relevance is actually among the quality aspects with the highest scores. Even students on discipline programmes express satisfaction – or optimism – when assessing the working life relevance of their own programme. Admittedly, they return slightly lower scores than the average, but still clearly above a middle 'satisfaction' value.

Seen against the realities of candidate success in the job market, these perceptions are rather optimistic but not wildly so. According to the latest national MA candidate survey (NIFU, 2016), unemployment for MA candidates six months after graduation rose in 2015 for the third consecutive year to reach 8.7 per cent. Among those who had found jobs, the percentage of candidates who defined themselves as 'mismatched'³ also rose for all sub-categories to a total of 14.3 per cent. Inside the 'mismatched' category 44 per cent report that they are over-qualified in terms of the level of their degree (e.g. a BA degree is normally sufficient qualification for the job). The latter figure may indicate that we do educate too many MA candidates, but this may still not be the case: for one thing, the figure tends to drop considerably during the first few years after graduation and, secondly, the share of over-qualified masters does little more than mirror the general situation in the labour market and has in fact not increased at all since 2003 in spite of a doubling in the number of candidates. It may well be that oil-recession economics is beginning to bite and that the rise is a part of a general tendency. On the whole, the job market seems to absorb masters reasonably well, which to some extent contradicts the 'mastermania' theory. But one has to bear in mind that this picture tells little about the 'real' working life relevance of the programmes. Employers recruit in a market of supply and demand and have to hire from what is supplied.

What then about our 'discipline' candidates? The three categories 'humanists', 'social scientists' and 'natural scientists' have markedly higher percentages of candidates than any other group outside full and relevant employment six months after graduation. While the percentage for all candidates is 23, the figures for humanists, social scientists and natural scientists are 33.1, 31.3 and 27.2 respectively. Natural scientists have the highest unemployment rate after six months with 14.3 per cent against an average of 8.7, and candidates in the social sciences and humanities are also above the average with 11.2 and 9.7 per cent respectively. More significantly, perhaps, there are many more over-qualified individuals among the humanists and social scientists, and more people who work less than full time, than in any other group. The differences may not be dramatic, making it fair to conclude that even 'discipline' masters on the whole adapt rather well to the labour market, given their extra challenge of not having a clearly defined job sector. On the other hand, when seen against the developments over the last years, such an interpretation cannot be described as anything but defensive.

² www.studentbarometeret.nokut.no

³ 'Mismatched' here covers 'overqualified for job', 'qualification irrelevant for job' and (unwilling) 'part-time employment'

After 2011, when a formulation requiring ‘academic’ or ‘discipline’⁴ relevance was first included in the accreditation standard, discipline programme providers may use this term to argue that the qualification of *all* MA candidates has working life relevance based on the general competence they acquire: generic skills and knowledge and experience with in-depth specialisation work that will always have transfer value outside the narrow discipline domain. This assessment is by and large underwritten by employers’ representatives in interviews (NOKUT, 2015). But the standard’s guidelines also suggest that a programme should have external contacts and information sources that can provide feedback from employers and provide more exact information about the candidates’ job destinations. The few recent studies that we have indicate that such contacts and information sources are still weakly developed by most ‘discipline’ programme communities. The vague and wide working life orientation results in a relative lack of collaboration or fixed contact points outside academia for ‘discipline’ academic communities, as is demonstrated by Rambøll (2007) and NOKUT (2015), but also that there is an increasing sense of urgency concerning studies’ working life relevance.

So far no large-scale candidate survey for bachelors has been conducted in Norway. The success, or otherwise, of BA candidates in the labour market must therefore be estimated from incomplete sources. The best information is provided by two large local studies, conducted fairly recently by the University of Oslo (UiO, 2014) and the University of Bergen (UiB, 2011). The two studies confirm the general tendencies concerning the match between education and employment that we see in the NIFU study. Candidates from discipline programmes do reasonably well, but still have the highest scores for unemployment, part-time employment or ‘mismatch’. The pattern is fairly consistent: In the short term natural science candidates do better than social scientists, who in turn do better than humanities candidates. But all groups improve with time, and natural scientists clearly more than the other two groups. Equally consistent is the pattern that BA candidates have bigger problems than MA candidates in finding matching jobs, with 39 per cent of humanities bachelors reporting dissatisfaction one year after graduation in the Oslo study (UiO, 2014). According to the Bergen study, 20 per cent of all humanities candidates were ‘mismatched’ two years after graduation (UiB, 2011, pp. 72-3).

It is interesting to note that a large proportion of *both* BA and MA candidates express that their current (first) jobs do not actually require their level of education. In the Oslo study 45 per cent of MA candidates say that their jobs could equally well be carried out by people with a BA qualification, while 34 per cent of humanities bachelors do not think that their qualification is really needed for their jobs (UiO, 2014, pp. 38-9). To some extent it may seem as if ‘over-qualified’ masters take the jobs that bachelors should have had, and that bachelors may have to lower their ambitions accordingly. This finds an echo in employer attitudes, as reported in the Bergen study: most employers make clear distinctions between jobs at MA or BA level, but still tend to recruit MA candidates in the BA segment, when these are available.

The survey: students’ perceptions of programme relevance and job opportunities

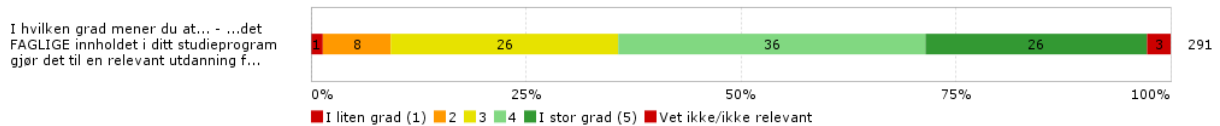
The survey was conducted in June 2016 among masters and bachelor students in discipline programmes in the ‘softer’ subject areas, among these languages and literature, ethics/philosophy, regional and cultural studies, media and information, theology/religion, history and management/administration. The survey is the first leg in a series that will include similar surveys to HE teachers and representatives of working life later in 2016/17. The survey went out to 496 students in 7 universities, 7 state university colleges and 7 private university colleges, representing a total of 117 programmes with student numbers ranging from 1 to 35. 54 of these were MA programmes, with altogether 214 students. The response rate was 38.

In the three first sets of questions the students were asked to make assessments on a five-point scale (1= hardly at all; 5= to a very large extent). The first set is about the **learning outcomes** from the programme they are following. Questions and answers were as follows:

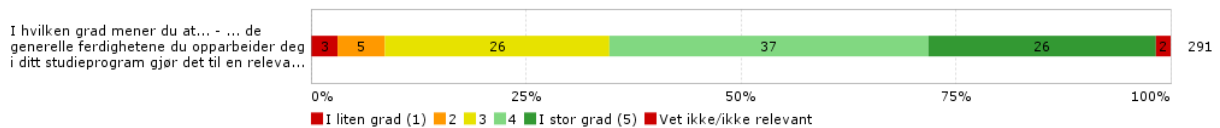
To what extent do you think that:

⁴ The term in Norwegian (‘*faglig relevans*’) is as difficult to translate precisely as it is vague!

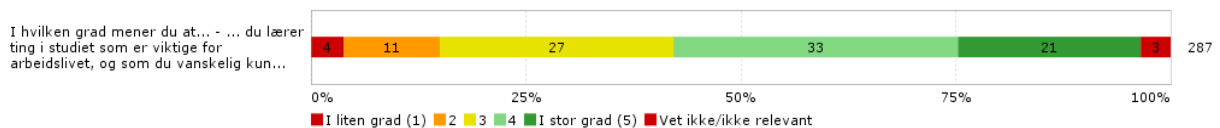
- the academic content of your study programme makes it a relevant qualification for working life?



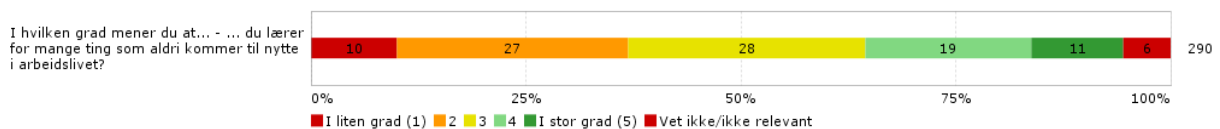
- the generic skills that you develop in your study programme make it a relevant qualification for working life?



- you are acquiring knowledge and skills in your study programme that you would not acquire in working life – and that are important for your working career?



- you are learning too many things that will never come to use in working life?



- your study programme only aims at further studies, without any orientation towards working life?



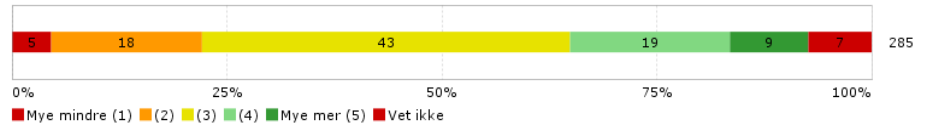
The first thing to notice here is that the students are overwhelmingly positive in their assessment of the working life relevance of *both* the academic content and the generic skills they acquire, with some 70 percent answering 4 or 5. This compares well with answers to a different question, where 50 per cent express that it is not the BA – MA difference that decides the working-life relevance of a programme, but its content (against 25 per cent disagreeing); equally positive is the assessment of relevant and important learning that only education can provide, although there are also some 30 per cent who find that there is too much that will never come to use in job careers. But when asked directly if they think that the programme has little or no orientation towards working life, a clear majority in fact answer yes. The students seem to think that that their programme has great value for working life, but that this comes about without any explicit orientation on the part of the provider.

In the next set of questions the students were asked to indicate what they think might **improve the working life relevance of their programmes**. Questions and answers were as follows:

If you could change your programme in order to make it more oriented towards working life, would you then have:

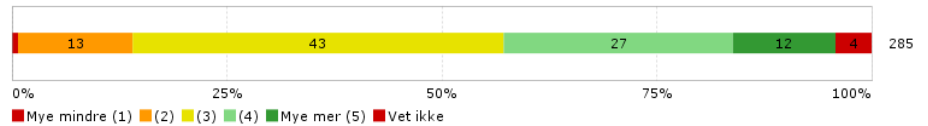
- made the programme thematically broader?

Hvis du skulle endre studiet i mer arbeidslivsrelevant retning, ville du da hatt... - ... mer faglig bredde i studiet?



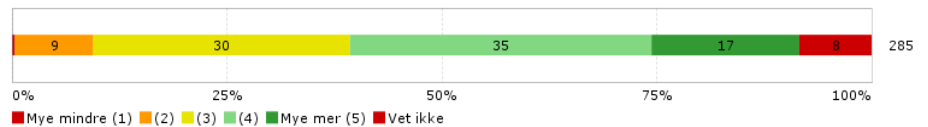
- given more space to elective courses?

Hvis du skulle endre studiet i mer arbeidslivsrelevant retning, ville du da hatt... - ... mer valgfrihet i studiet?



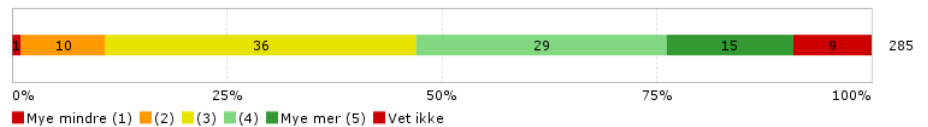
- made the programme more thematically narrow and specialised?

Hvis du skulle endre studiet i mer arbeidslivsrelevant retning, ville du da hatt... - ... mer faglig spissing i studiet?



- increased the thematic coherence of the programme?

Hvis du skulle endre studiet i mer arbeidslivsrelevant retning, ville du da hatt... - ... større innholdsmess...



The respondents' insecure attitude to these questions is revealed by the fact that their answers are very positive to all of the changes that are indicated, although to some extent they imply directly contradictory strategies. The students think that both more breadth and more specialisation, both more electives and more coherence, would enhance working life relevance. What the answers first of all indicate, and particularly when seen in connection with answers in the first set of questions, is that students will mainly assess the link between HE qualification and working life career opportunities based on 'external' signals: on what general experience tells them about job opportunities and not so much on how they assess the working life relevance of the programme itself.

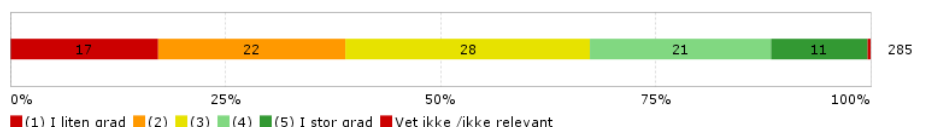
The survey also contained the following question: To what extent do you agree that bachelor programmes that are not explicitly profession-oriented should have two different streams, one preparing for MA studies and one for working life? The fact that 54 per cent agreed, with only 16 per cent disagreeing and 17 per cent 'neutral', indicates that students feel uneasy about their programmes as preparation for working life.

The third set of questions mainly address the students' ideas and expectations about their own **future job opportunities**:

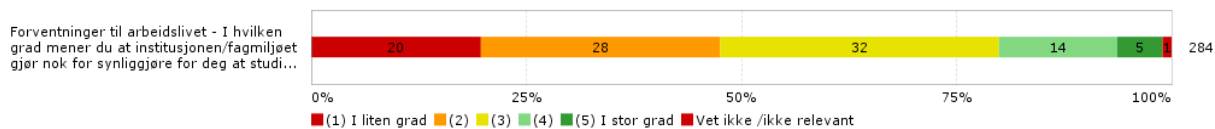
To what extent do you think that:

- you know what your opportunities will be like in working life when you graduate?

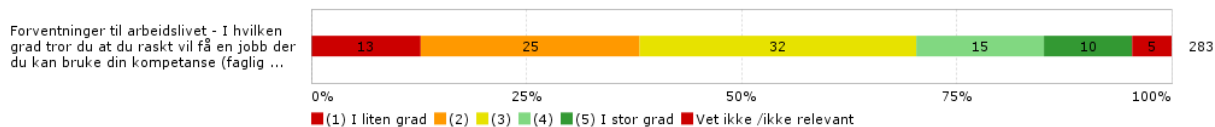
Forventninger til arbeidslivet - I hvilken grad mener du at du kjenner til mulighetene du har i arbeidslivet ett...



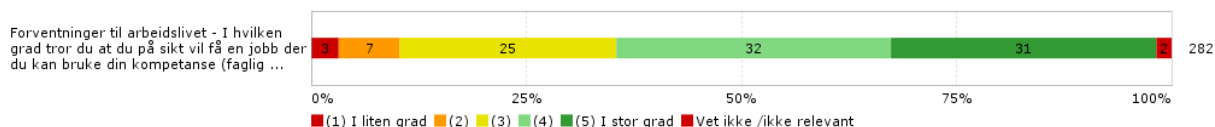
- your institution or discipline community has done enough to explain the programme's relevance for working life to you as a student?



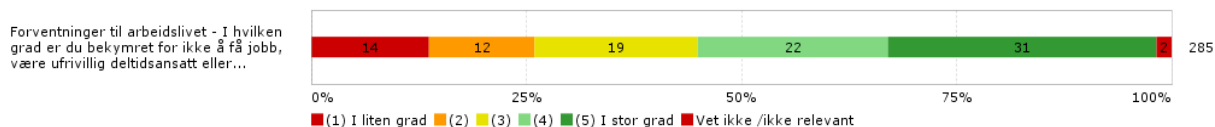
- you will be able to get a job quickly where you can make use of the discipline and generic competence that the programme has given you?



- you will be able to get a job in the long term where you can make use of the discipline and generic competence that the programme has given you?



- you may either not find a job, may have to work part-time, or find only irrelevant work after graduation?



The students reveal a good deal of insecurity around these questions too. Choice of the middle value (3) is fairly frequent, varying from 19 to 32, but for the two first questions there are more respondents on the 'negative' side ('I do not know enough'; 'the institution does not do enough') than on the positive side. Still, the students are fairly positive concerning the prospects of finding relevant employment in the long term, with 63 per cent returning 4 or 5 and only 10 per cent 1 or 2. When assessing short term opportunities the response pattern is much more negative: 25 per cent 4 or 5 against 38 per cent 1 or 2. Anxiety that there will be problems finding relevant full-time employment in the future is strongly expressed in answers to the final question, with 53 per cent on the 'worried' (4 or 5) side. This is confirmed in a later question in the survey, where as many as 75 per cent agree, 49 per cent even 'strongly', with the statement that 'today it is difficult to compete in the labour market with a bachelor degree.'

In our sample 74 per cent say that they consider continuing their studies at the next degree level (MA and PhD respectively), and 70 per cent of these say that work opportunities loom large in their considerations. That is a significant increase in the weight that employment considerations had in their initial decision to choose their current programme (41 per cent). There is a case for saying that the challenges that you face in the job market with this type of education gradually sink in and motivate students to 'up' their qualification with a higher degree. When students make these assessments, they say that the information on which the assessments are based mainly comes from their institution and to some extent from working life itself. Somewhat surprisingly, perhaps, information from the media or family/friends gives much lower scores.

Summing up – with some reflections

The national picture of the relationship between discipline studies and working life outside academia is full of complicating, or even contradictory, facets. In spite of the fact that discipline candidates, particularly in the humanities and other 'softer' disciplines, have greater problems than others in finding relevant, full-time employment, satisfaction with working life relevance is high among staff as well as students, and career optimism is also quite high among the students. Basically, this seeming contradiction must be explained by two factors: First, from the students' point of view, the fact that the general level of unemployment has been very low in Norway for a long time now, keeping the demand for (any) HE qualifications correspondingly high; secondly, from the providers' point of view, that this generally favourable labour market situation has allowed

discipline communities at the universities and colleges to take refuge behind concepts like ‘academic’ (or ‘generic’) relevance in their hesitance to adapt their provision to new demands. However, this has happened at the cost of considerable losses in student numbers.

So the providing institutions and their staff have not really felt the push to re-orientate their provision in discipline-based programmes in the direction of more explicit working life relevance. Nor have they felt the need to develop and nurture good and stable contacts or collaboration outside their institutions. But of course, discipline teachers are also discipline researchers and most of them would most likely argue that discipline knowledge is their main concern and professional responsibility. In the long run, however, a strategy exclusively based on the discipline itself will have (and has already begun to have) falling recruitment as an effect. The fact that over 54 per cent of the students in our survey agree with the suggestion that institutions should create separate streams for research-oriented and working life-oriented BA students, with only 16 per cent disagreeing, indicates an awareness that their study programmes could have prepared them better for work careers. This is also highlighted by answers that express students’ worries about employment after graduation, thus contradicting their optimistic responses to other similar questions.

Breadth and depth in the composition of the lower degree has always been a cause for concern. In the 1990’s the old cand. mag. degree was subject to much debate and criticism, mainly because it was said to be too ‘unspecified’ and took too long to obtain: 4.5 years as opposed to 3 years for the Anglo-Saxon BA. After having been replaced by the shorter and more specialised BA, however, the BA specialisation turned out to have no more depth than just one of the three subjects of the old degree, although it is frequently more specialised *inside* the discipline domain. Thus the discipline BA may seem to have fallen between two stools: it has become more, rather than less, oriented towards the discipline itself, often providing a specialisation that is both too ‘specific’ and too shallow at the same time, pointing towards discipline work in research and teaching where jobs are scarce, and where MA and PhD provide the only viable qualifications. This will partly explain why so many BA students plan to move on to MA studies, in spite of their expressed view that the BA programme they are attending has high relevance for working life. In turn it may also explain why so many discipline candidates, both BA’s and MA’s, feel that they are overqualified for their jobs when they start their careers.

An interesting frame of reference for our discussion is provided by two opposed theories concerning education and working life competence: human capital theory (HC-theory) and positional theory (P-theory). A central tenet of HC-theory is the ‘positive’ idea that education will enhance the *productive* capabilities of an individual.⁵ What you learn, if at all relevant, will therefore be directly useful in your subsequent job, and this is generally perceived and appreciated by both students and employers. For the discipline programmes, though, indications are that these seem to be struggling with the relevance side of their learning outcomes.

According to P-theory (or signaling theory), on the other hand, higher education may be useful, but is mainly important because it is a selection mechanism based on innate *learning* capabilities: education may not, per se, increase your productive capabilities, but produces a signal to employers that you do have learning capabilities that will affect your productivity in your job – and what the cost will be to the employer. According to this theory, higher education is basically seen as a screening device.⁶ *What* you study is not as important as we may like to think, which could be good news for the discipline programmes and their high level of ‘generic’ relevance.

Both theories, as it were, see the issue from the employer’s perspective: what is the working-life value of education? And although they differ in their assumptions about the relationship between productivity and education, both theories are to some extent merit-based in the sense that education is seen to give employers the chance to pick the ‘best’ recruits. When seen from the students’ perspective, however, a more cynical variation on the ‘position’ theme may come into play: all job seekers could be seen as being in a queue and your level of education functions as a main determinant for your placement in that queue. Higher education

⁵ The description is mainly based on Nerdrum (1999): *The Economics of Human Capital* and Mincer (1958): *Investment in Human Capital and Personal Income Distribution*, *Journal of Political Economy* Vol. 66, No. 4 (Aug., 1958).

⁶ Nerdrum (1999, p. 61) and Velden and Wolbers (2007) *How much does education matter and why?* (pp. 65-66.)

then primarily becomes a defensive strategy. As more and more people get higher education, you as an individual will also have to get more in order to keep your place in the queue – a sort of ‘red queen’-problem.⁷ This would be the theory that explains the phenomena of ‘mastermania’ and over-qualification, to the extent that these typically affect discipline programmes.

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⁷ See for instance: Stasi & al.: «What makes education positional? Institutions, overeducation and the competition for jobs”: (p. 3)