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FROM AI TO ABROAD: WHAT'S SHAPING STUDENT LIFE TODAY

Michael Calabranno (editor)

In a world of rapidly evolving tech, learning has never been more efficient – or more complex. Language apps promise fluency at your fingertips, and AI tools can now summarise entire books in seconds. But are these digital shortcuts as helpful as they seem, or are they creating new challenges beneath the surface? In this latest issue of JABS, we dig into the promises and pitfalls of modern learning tools.

Also in this edition, younger students will find practical advice on overcoming procrastination and staying on track with research. They will also learn that their local gym might be more academically useful than they think.

“Studying abroad” understandably has become a recurring feature and returns, with tips on how to plan your time overseas and choose the right destination. For those juggling academics and parenting, we highlight support structures available to student parents.

We will turn a critical eye toward the much-debated Excellence Strategy and its impact on our institute. Also, catch up with two alumni whose journeys began here.

And what about student life beyond books? We explore whether Dresden’s student clubs still draw a crowd and recap this year’s unforgettable Campus Festival (yes, our ears are still ringing). Plus, we take a playful look at how campus life stacks up against its Hollywood portrayals – expect drama, laughs, and some surprisingly accurate clichés.

There’s plenty to discover in this issue – so dive in, explore, and enjoy your JABS journey.

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Study smarter, not harder



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by Carolin Witzschas

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"I AIN'T READING ALL THAT": THE DEATH OF READING IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Carolyn Witzschas

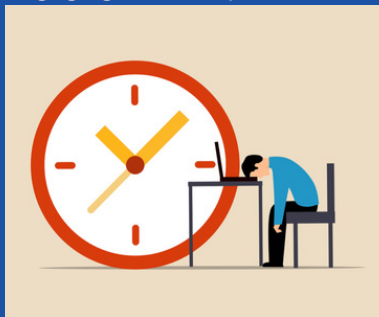
In an era defined by scrolling, swiping and skimming, the practice of deep and focused reading is quietly slipping away. What was once considered a fundamental academic skill is now often seen as a burden in today's fast-paced digital world. The phrase "I ain't reading all that", commonly found in online comment sections and memes, may seem humorous at first, but it simultaneously reveals a deeper academic shift, namely that of a growing reluctance to engage with lengthy or complex material. Faced with the temptation of AI shortcuts and an attention span increasingly fractured by technology, we must ask ourselves: how can we reclaim our ability to read meaningfully in the digital age?

Short Attention Spans, Reading Burnout and Academic Pressure

Beneath the waning unwillingness to interact with complex texts lies a more pervasive issue, which is the erosion of sustained attention. This shift in cognitive functioning, often blamed on the omnipresence of digital technology, goes far beyond reading. It affects how students

learn, communicate, manage time and even cope emotionally. As a result, attention has become increasingly fragmented. Studies have shown, for instance, that students often remain 'on task' for less than ten minutes at a time before being drawn away by messages, notifications or social media. The problem, however, extends beyond productivity. As phone use rises, so does a measurable sense of anxiety and dependence. According to research, students unlock their phones 50 to 60 times a day. The compulsion to check in, respond instantly or keep up with social media feeds leads to heightened stress and even physiological arousal. Merely hearing a phone buzz without being able to check it is enough to provoke spikes in heart rate and anxiety, particularly among younger users. In short, our attention is no longer simply diverted but fundamentally restructured. The brain, conditioned by rapid content-switching and constant notifications, is less able to sustain the prolonged focus that deep reading and critical thinking require. This has major

implications not only for academic success but also for mental well-being and the ability to engage in reflective or empathetic thought – qualities that are essential for truly engaging with complex texts.




For many university students, reading no longer serves as a source of curiosity or intellectual enrichment, but is increasingly approached as a mere practical necessity within the demands of academic life. With dense reading lists, deadlines and limited time, students often experience what can now be referred to as ‘reading burnout’. The mental fatigue that results from juggling multiple academic demands leaves little to no energy for sustained engagement with texts. Instead of reading to understand, many resort to skimming in order to keep up. As researchers note, the “reading culture is declining due to digital media [...], leading to reduced empathy, critical thinking, and professional skills”. This decline is intensified by the influence of social media, where extremely

fast-paced and bite-sized content trains the brain to crave instant gratification. When students become accustomed to consuming information in the span of sheer seconds, the patience and focus required for deep academic reading begin to erode. The result is a shift from active engagement to surface-level interaction with texts, coupled with a shorter attention span and a reduced capacity for complex analysis. In such an environment, the act of reading becomes less about genuine learning and more about completing the next assignment, treated as just another item on an ever-growing to-do list.

AI as the New Academic Shortcut

The rise of artificial intelligence has brought powerful new tools to the modern academic world by offering students more efficient ways to approach and handle heavy reading loads. AI-powered summarisers can break down wordy chapters and complex articles into brief, digestible overviews, which can save students valuable time and effort. Considering those balancing coursework, part-time jobs and personal responsibilities, these technologies can thus function as an appealing shortcut to quickly grasp large amounts of




information. Despite its convenience, AI naturally comes with challenges. Overreliance on AI-generated summaries can lead to a more passive learning style, increasing the risk that students overlook the more nuanced insights and complexities embedded in the original texts. Moreover, critical thinking and detailed interpretation often suffer when engagement is limited to condensed versions. Whilst AI tools can be useful aids, they should not replace close reading and active involvement with academic material. Finding a balance between leveraging technology and preserving traditional study habits is crucial for achieving true understanding and maintaining intellectual rigour.

How to Stay Engaged with Reading in the Digital Age

Staying engaged with reading in the digital age requires more than just motivation, as it calls for deliberate, intrinsic strategies to counteract a world engineered for distraction. To reclaim focused reading, it is essential to create an intentional space for it. This might involve silencing notifications, putting phones on airplane mode or setting aside specific times in the day reserved exclusively for reading. Even small changes, such as choosing a physical book over a screen, can help reduce the

temptation to multitask. Rethinking our approach to reading itself is just as crucial. Rather than treating it as a chore to be completed, reading can be reframed as an opportunity for intellectual curiosity and reflection. Taking notes or annotating passages can turn reading into a more active and meaningful process. Technology, too, can play a supportive role, particularly when used not to bypass the reading experience, but to enhance it. AI tools, for instance, can help clarify difficult material by generating guiding questions as well as offering context that deepens understanding. When used to supplement rather than replace thoughtful engagement, they can significantly enhance comprehension as well as the overall reading experience.

Ultimately, engaging with reading today is not about rejecting technology, but about using it mindfully. The key lies in making time for quiet in a world full of distractions and creating a space where deeper thinking and genuine focus can grow. In doing so, we not only preserve the skill of reading but simultaneously protect the mental habits that sustain critical thinking and lifelong learning. Unless we begin to reclaim our attention, the phrase “I ain’t reading all that” risks evolving from a mere meme into our collective academic default.



Ultimately, engaging with reading today is not about rejecting technology, but about using it mindfully. The key lies in making time for quiet in a world full of distractions and creating a space where deeper thinking and genuine focus can grow. In doing so, we not only preserve the skill of reading but simultaneously protect the mental habits that sustain critical thinking and lifelong learning. Unless we begin to reclaim our attention, the phrase “I ain’t reading all that” risks evolving from a mere meme into our collective academic default.



PROCRASTINATION AND THE ART OF AVOIDANCE


Carolyn Witzschas

Notwithstanding the mounting pressure of academic life, a new mantra seems to resonate across campuses, namely that of 'If tomorrow is not the due date, then today is not the do date'. This expression, which in recent times has gained significant traction on social media within academic communities, illustrates the prevalent tendency to postpone tasks until deadlines are imminent. Procrastination, often dismissed as sheer laziness, is in fact a far more complex phenomenon that many students know all too well. Meta-analytic research from the late 2000s has already revealed that nearly 50% of college students struggle with consistent procrastination. The rise of new technologies and the accompanying surge in digital distractions has only further tested students' resilience. This emphasises not only the widespread nature of this issue in general but also how deeply rooted it is within the academic environment. Although it may be convenient for others to jump to conclusions and dismiss procrastination as mere lack of motivation, its underlying causes

are often a lot more nuanced. What, then, makes procrastination so deceptively compelling? Is it merely a form of escapism, or have students come to depend on the urgency of deadlines as a means to drive performance? If so, how can this reliance be redirected into healthier habits? What strategies can one implement to overcome the art of avoidance?

Understanding the Psychology behind Procrastination

According to research, procrastination is rooted in an interplay of psychological, behavioural and situational factors. Some experts adopt a more optimistic view, framing procrastination neither as a fixed character flaw nor indiscipline, but as a behavioural deviation that can be counteracted through changes in thinking, motivation and daily habits. Furthermore, researchers point out that not all forms of procrastination are inherently harmful. In fact, they suggest that when procrastination is strategic and paired with a clear plan, it can yield academic results comparable to those of non-procrastinators.



The greater concern, they argue, lies not in occasional delays but in the overall limited time many students devote to academic work. Despite its stigma being challenged by this perspective, procrastination remains a counterproductive habit in most cases, particularly when driven by underlying forces.

Amplifying the complexity of the art of avoidance, both internal and external factors play a notable role in shaping an overall avoidant behaviour. Internally, students may struggle with psychological traits such as perfectionism, low self-regulation and reduced motivation, or physical conditions like fatigue and illness that diminish their ability to initiate tasks in the first place. Regarding external factors which might hinder productivity, it is evident that the pervasive presence of digital distractions today presents a significant challenge to sustaining focus in the academic realm. Moreover, excessive workload, lack of parental support and social influences, such as peers who also delay assignments, can all aggravate procrastination tendencies. Notably, behaviours like internet overuse or excessive gaming have been identified as common forms of distraction that divert attention from academic responsibilities. Understanding these root causes is essential not only for addressing

procrastination itself but also for implementing healthier, more sustainable practices in academic life. Left unmanaged, procrastination can give rise to a host of negative emotional and cognitive outcomes, including academic anxiety, stress, reduced performance and even physical exhaustion. Studies have linked chronic procrastination to lower academic achievement, heightened emotional distress and a greater susceptibility to both mental and physical health challenges. As research suggests, the ability to self-regulate, defined as the capacity to monitor and adjust one's behaviour in alignment with long-term goals, plays a crucial role in mitigating these effects. Strengthening self-regulation, therefore, may be one of the most effective strategies for reducing academic procrastination and encouraging a more balanced approach to learning.

Strategies for Overcoming Procrastination

Whilst procrastination may stem from a variety of causes, it is by no means insurmountable. Though ultimately, every student should discover and implement strategies tailored to their individual lifestyle, the subsequent suggestions can serve as a starting point in overcoming this hurdle and replacing avoidance with

consistent and intentional action. Evidence-based techniques can help students regain control over their time and productivity, oftentimes even without drastic changes to their daily routines.



One effective approach is breaking large tasks into smaller, manageable steps and organising them by priority. This technique can reduce the feeling of being overwhelmed and create a sense of progress, which in turn can enhance motivation and mental endurance. By setting specific, time-bound goals rather than vague intentions, the likelihood of adhering to one's set plans can be increased immensely. Furthermore, writing down these goals, such as on a to-do list, can further enhance commitment and clarity, ultimately making it easier to track progress and stay focused. Combining these strategies with helpful tools such as the

Pomodoro Technique, which alternates focused work sessions with short breaks, can additionally support sustained attention. Addressing the cognitive and emotional patterns that reinforce delay can be considered equally important. Practising self-compassion, for example, has been shown to reduce the guilt and anxiety that often perpetuate the cycle of procrastination. Rather than punishing oneself for putting off tasks, students are encouraged to reflect on what caused the delay and adjust accordingly. As a form of positive reinforcement, rewarding oneself after completing small tasks can be effective as well. This approach helps build a more encouraging and motivating association with work, thus making tasks not only more manageable but also more enjoyable. Moreover, the use of accountability structures, such as study groups, peer check-ins or productivity apps, can provide external motivation and social reinforcement.

Overall, creating a dedicated study environment, minimising digital distractions and maintaining consistent routines contribute to better time management.

RESEARCH SURVIVAL GUIDE: TIPS FOR YOUR NEXT ENGLISH TERM PAPER

Nelly-Marleen Groß

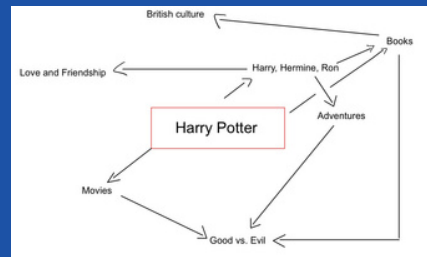
Aristotle once said, “The roots of education are bitter, but the fruit is sweet.” While I am desperately browsing JSTOR to find suitable literature for my research question and asking myself whether my topic is even scientific enough for an English term paper, I wonder if this is the sweet fruit he was referring to. I experience this every semester, regardless of whether I am examining slang on TikTok for linguistics or the history of Native Americans for cultural studies.


Unsurprisingly, conversations with my fellow students have shown me that they feel the exact same way. For this reason, I have made it my mammoth task to try and make our lives easier by creating a survival guide to research in English studies, including helpful tips and tricks to save us all from reading another ten PDFs that have nothing to do with our research question at one o'clock in the morning. Disclaimer: Unfortunately, you still have to write the term paper yourself in the end.

First of all, it is necessary to focus on selecting a topic to then develop a research question. In most cases, the main subjects of the seminar and the course requirements already give an idea of what to focus on.

After that, there are various exercises you can do to come up with a topic which is also related to your interests – even in the slightest way. This can be helpful for you because it is a hell of a ride to write about something you could not care less about. I want to quickly introduce how to create a concept map, similar to a mind map, in order to develop a topic as well as a thesis statement.

In this exercise, you have the chance to focus on your interest in general or a matter you talked about in the seminar – anything that comes to your mind can be noted. Write down words or word groups related to either of them and try to connect them by using arrows. With this technique, you will find different aspects which already have a connection or one could be created, and you can develop a topic for your term paper with this.

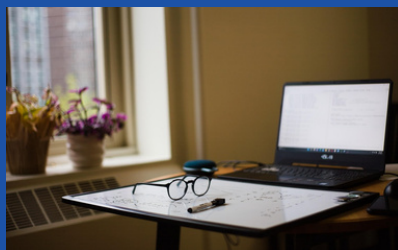





Try to narrow down as much as you can, e.g., if you want to write about a TV show, decide on one season or a few episodes that are analyzable. Once you proceed to find a precise research question, keep one thing in mind: avoid anything that can be answered with Yes/No. Starting with words like 'to what extent', 'how significant', 'how does', 'which', etc., is the key to a good research question. In general, the focus of your term paper should be interesting to you and relate to the seminar's topic, but at the same time, not be too broad because you are (hopefully) not writing a dissertation (yet).

Next step: Finding and working with secondary literature. First of all, helpful publications can be journal articles, monographs, anthologies, as well as textbooks or manuals.

How much and what exactly is needed should be explained in the seminar. One opportunity to find literature is by using the SLUB website, typing in related words to your topic in the search bar, and seeing what is suggested. When you go on a little trip to our university's library later, you can not only look for the books recommended online, but also take books that are on the same shelf into consideration. Sometimes, you are lucky and discover more jewels about your topics. Also, the SLUB offers inter-library loans,



which might open new doors to access more literature. If a library is your nemesis, you can find many publications such as essays, journal articles, and certain book chapters online. The SLUB has many of them digitized already, and you can easily locate them by setting a filter on the website. Nevertheless, it is best not to focus on this alone. JSTOR, De Gruyter, and Taylor & Francis online, as well as Google Scholar, are a few suggestions to expand your literature hunt. In my experience, a large number of publications are open access or available to us through the SLUB there. It is helpful to search for various terms related to your general topic and research question, going from broad to narrow. If an author appears several times during this process, inquire about other publications that might be relevant to you. Read the title and the first paragraph of everything you can find to determine if it is helpful literature, and start taking simple notes to remember the main arguments of each publication.



Once you have made your choices, it is time to read. Here are a few tips to prevent you from reading one book each night for two weeks straight. As soon as you are familiar with an author's writing style, you can increase your reading speed, but before that, try to take it slow to comprehend the content.

It is a lot more time-consuming to read every sentence three times right from the start because you scan the words too fast. This also counts for when you realize that you cannot concentrate. Do not force yourself to read, but put your book, etc., aside for a while and continue later. Furthermore, you can look for specific terms and read the paragraphs around or even chapters about them because it is not always necessary to read an entire book or journal article. Start or continue taking more notes about each written piece and mark possible quotations for later.

If you are running out of time, AI can summarize texts for you, but do not rely on this entirely, and make sure the content is correct. However, answering your research question with secondary literature alone is often deficient, which is why you have to research on your own. In other words, you can analyze a season of a TV show or a work covered in the seminar under a certain focus.

Experts advise creating an online survey or interviewing relevant people to gain data that can be evaluated. Keep in mind that we are not professional scientists (yet), and a term paper provides very limited space. It is also possible to combine research methods such as an interview and a survey. The best choice depends on your topic and what you can best implement. The final step before you start writing is finding a structure. For the main part, dedicate more pages to your own research and data evaluation than to your secondary literature because this is what the lecturer is most interested in. After all this, it is now time to sit down at your laptop and start writing.

If you ever feel like you are going to lose your mind during the writing process of an English term paper, maybe you will turn to this article again and find a vital tip that you almost forgot about. Believe in yourself, and good luck with all your written assignments this semester. No, writing term papers will not get easier or more enjoyable, but each finished paper is a step closer to freedom!

In case you need help with organizing and citing at the end, here is a helpful website for you:

<https://www.zotero.org>



Uni without Uni



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COLLEGE MOVIES VS. COLLEGE REALITY: WHAT HOLLYWOOD GETS RIGHT AND WRONG

Maximilian Löper

Starting off as a carefree, fashionable, yet somewhat naïve, sorority girl thriving in her sunny, bubblegum-pink world, Elle Woods' life is soon about to shift gears. One day, her boyfriend breaks up with her to pursue a serious career in politics. Determined to win him back, she enrolls at Harvard Law School, only to find herself overwhelmed and mocked by peers and professors alike. But through hard work and by staying true to herself, she eventually discovers her true potential, outgrows her ex-boyfriend, and proves everyone wrong by winning a high-profile court case.

Whether it's dramatic personal makeovers, exaggerated college stereotypes like the nerd or the genius prodigy, or wild frat parties with endless parades of red Solo cups, movies like *Legally Blonde* have done a lot to shape how we imagine the college experience. But do these films really reflect the everyday reality of student life? Let's take a closer look at the myths movies sell us and explore how closely (or not) they resemble the college lives we actually live.

"The stories we tell not only reflect our world—they shape it," writes author Hannah Miller. In the case of college films, that shaping starts long before we ever set foot on campus. That raises the question: How much of what we expect from college is influenced by the movies we've watched growing up? Scenes like those in *Legally Blonde* (2001) envision the campus as a place of self-improvement and fulfillment. Attending college marks a genuine shift in our biographies, as almost overnight, we're forced to take care of ourselves and structure our lives. This gives us room to grow personally, develop new skills, or even find new trajectories. Combine this intellectual journey with a physical glow-up, and Elle Woods' story starts to feel surprisingly authentic. While we as students are constantly working toward our dreams, facing challenges like stress, identity crises, or the fear of not living up to our true potential seems all too familiar. Yet even movies like *Good Will Hunting* (1997), *Whiplash* (2014), or *The Social Network* (2010) explore those very

anxieties and ambitions, offering equally compelling campus stories.


Admittedly, not every student strives to become the next Mark Zuckerberg, which is why more lighthearted films often portray college as a place of harmless fun and nonstop parties. I've already touched on the plain, instantly recognizable red Solo cups. Those undeniably mark a staple of the classic Hollywood college party scene. Think of the frat party chaos in *Old School* (2003), *22 Jump Street* (2014), or even the aforementioned *Legally Blonde*; these cups have become the cinematic shortcut for college nightlife and parties. Whether they appear at real college events, however, is a question everyone has to answer for themselves.



Whether we are enjoying our free time or structuring our university lives, our dorms arguably sit at the

center of it all. As the anchor of a student's private life, you might assume that our dorm rooms are always pristine, neat, and clean – if you believe what Hollywood shows us. In reality, things often look a little different, ranging from minor inconveniences like people leaving their trash in the hallways all the way up to cockroaches infesting the kitchens of shared apartments. Fortunately, I'm lucky enough not to share my apartment with anyone. Still, I extend my condolences to everyone who has been deceived by Hollywood and its portrayal of students' living conditions.

In defense of the movies, they usually only show what is significant to their respective narratives. As the storytelling principle known as Chekhov's Gun emphasizes, every element introduced in a narrative should be necessary and contribute to the plot. So, as much as I'd love to see a film revolving around a cockroach infestation in a student hall, I fear that Hollywood executives deem other stories far more compelling. Hence, many films that are centered around college tend to focus on narratives that are rather detached from actual college reality. I mean, how often do you have to face a masked killer on campus



slaughtering your peers, like the students in *Scream 2* (1997) or *Urban Legend* (1998)?

Sticking with those two films, they portray a tight-knit group of friends navigating campus life - fitting, of course, for stories where a killer picks them off one by one. But this trope isn't limited to slasher films. The idea of an instantly close, inseparable college friend group appears across genres, from comedies like *Pitch Perfect* (2012) to dramas like *The Social Network*. Hollywood loves to romanticize the notion that you'll arrive on campus and immediately find "your people." Whether that reflects reality, however, is up for debate and personal experience. While I met some of my closest friends during my first semester, many other friendships developed gradually over the following years. Real campus relationships, much like real college life in general, don't always follow a movie-perfect script.

Looking back at how films shape our expectations, it becomes clear that while college movies capture fragments of reality, they often blur the line between fiction and actual student life. These films tend to exaggerate, idealize, or spotlight aspects that don't always reflect the everyday campus experience. Still, they occasionally manage to offer surprisingly accurate glimpses of what it means to be a student. So in the end, here's hoping your college life feels a lot more *Legally Blonde* than *Scream 2*.



STUDENT CLUBS IN 2025: ESSENTIAL OR IRRELEVANT?

Nelly-Marleen Groß

This semester, I have been a student at TU Dresden for three years. If I am being honest, it feels like I started my studies just yesterday. Along with this feeling comes the realization of how many activities and places I have yet to experience in Dresden, as well as at our university. Only recently did I discover that I completely missed out on one of them: student clubs. During all this time here, I attended the *Bockbieranstich* from *Club 11* about five times – but without ever being inside the actual building. Although this event was always a lot of fun, I cannot tell any other catching stories about my experience at student clubs because I simply do not have any. This is when I started questioning if I was the only one missing out on all the fun opportunities.

For that reason, I decided to ask around on campus – by this, I mean that I sent an online survey to several university group chats – to examine other students' tales about nightlife in Dresden.


So let me briefly introduce the student clubs and the organization behind them, as well as evaluate the survey's results in order to find an answer to the question:

Are student clubs in Dresden essential or irrelevant in 2025?

Altogether, twelve places in our university town belong to *VDSC, Vereinigung Dresdner Studentenclubs*. On their website, you can find all the included student clubs as well as a map with their locations. Furthermore, there is a page dedicated to the upcoming events in the following two weeks. With the help of a simple click on a selected event, e.g., karaoke nights or *Bierathlon*, you will be taken directly to the website of the club and receive further information. This strategically solves the time-consuming task of checking each internet platform individually.

Nevertheless, all student clubs have Instagram accounts where they advertise events, in case you only want to keep up with your favorite one.

Obviously, there are many ways to prevent missing out on any of the countless club nights, but are students actually taking advantage of them? 99 percent of the participants have at least entered one of the student clubs in Dresden before.



Bärenzwinger and *Club 11* belong to the most visited places. Both offer a wide range of events, such as weekly specials or concerts. Other successful clubs in the voting were *Gutzkowclub* as well as *Kino im Kasten*.

Although a third of the people did not pick a favorite student club, *Gutzkowclub* and *Club 11* won the race. The reason for not being able to assign a favorite one can be found in another result of the survey questions. Almost every participating student said they went to a student club about two or three times a year, while some even admitted that they never went there.

As a consequence of this, it is obviously difficult to pick a favorite place. Apart from the fact that this is an incredibly low attendance of students, one might question the reasons for this. Most participants stated that there were better options for free time activities, or they simply did not enjoy partying there, e.g., because of their location or even lack of visitors.

The answers made it seem like going to one of the student clubs rarely ever crosses young people's minds. To quote one anonymous participant: "Many of the clubs tend to be empty unless there are special events or you get lucky". Although a few students mentioned the benefits of cheap alcohol and especially a great place to meet new people or close friends, these aspects do not attract the majority of students.

Of course, Dresden is a big city with endless opportunities besides the student clubs, but I was convinced more people would favor them. About 70 percent agreed that *Bockbieranstich* is the most popular event among students. Every year, hundreds of people meet on the ground around *Club 11* and celebrate with music and beer all day long. Nevertheless, as this is a huge outdoor event with lots of music, it cannot be directly compared to actually spending an evening inside the student clubs. If I am being honest, I cannot fully admit that this outcome was unexpected. Not too long ago, I concluded that student clubs are not part of our typical student life, and the survey's results support my assumption.

In 2025, regularly going to student clubs, not just their special events, seems irrelevant for the majority. Obviously, the participants in my survey did not cover the entirety of students at TU Dresden, and there is probably a large number enjoying these student clubs because otherwise they would not exist. Nevertheless, there is a possibility that some of us should have a more open mind to student clubs and simply give them a try because they offer events for everyone.

Perhaps we will see each other there!

BETWEEN BEATS AND BOUNDARIES: JOY, MUSIC, AND THE LIMITS OF AWARENESS

Antonin Donath

Sunburnt shoulders, glitter in the air, and bass you could feel in your chest. What began as a small party organized by a few student councils has become a summer ritual for thousands of students at TU Dresden. Once each year, the Campus Festival turns the university into a colorful celebration of music, lifestyle, and shared moments. It is not just a concert but a festival that brings together big names, rising artists, and that electric feeling that maybe, just maybe, this was the best Thursday of the year.

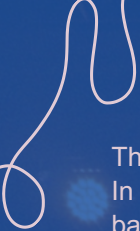
It all started in 1996 with a small Campus Party that was organized by the student councils of the economics and law faculties at TU Dresden. While the law program has long since been dissolved, the spirit of that early celebration continues to live on in what has become one of the biggest university festivals in Germany: the TU Dresden Campus Festival.

This year's edition, held on Thursday, June 26th, 2025, once again showed just how deeply the event is anchored in Dresden's student culture. All 9,000 tickets were completely sold out more than a month in advance, and demand still seemed to grow every day. On Instagram and in WhatsApp groups, people were begging for last-minute tickets, sometimes offering 50 euros and more to get one. Some posts even offered trades, one student wrote: "Concert tickets, bike repairs, or whatever you want, just DM me." The hype around the festival seems to grow every year.

major improvement this year was the addition of two separate entrances, which helped dramatically reduce waiting times. The organizers seem to have listened to the criticism of the many annoyed guests of last year, some of whom waited for hours and missed a substantial part of the festival. This year, many guests were surprised at how quickly they got in. "It was actually smooth this year," one student commented. "We barely waited at all."

Under clear blue skies and with temperatures climbing above 30 degrees, the festival grounds came alive with color and movement.

A short rain shower in the afternoon did not lower the mood. On the contrary, it gave the crowd a refreshing break from the heat. People danced in the warm rain, relaxed in the shade, and enjoyed food from a variety of pop-up stands that offered everything from French fries to hot churros and a large variety of vegan meals.



The Campus Festival has always had a tradition of discovering talent early. In the last few years, artists like *Ikkimel*, *\$oho Bani*, and even the Dresden-based rap-pop collective *01099* performed here, before they experienced their complete breakthrough. Back then, they were still insider tips in the student scene. “I saw *01099* here in 2021, when they were still relatively unknown,” one student remembered. “Now they sell out whole tours. That’s what makes the Campus Festival so special, you see artists before everyone else does.”

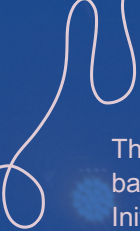
This year continued that tradition of highlighting emerging artists. In the early evening, *Edwin Rosen* brought his emotionally charged synth-pop to the main stage. His set was atmospheric and calm, drawing the audience into his introspective lyrics and nostalgic melodies. This mix of coldwave and romantic pop created an atmosphere of quiet intensity. “His set wasn’t wild, but it hit deep,” someone in the crowd said. “You just felt it.”

Later in the evening, the crowd gathered again for the final act of the night, the Berlin-based headlining artist *Zartmann*. Known for blending emotional lyrics with electronic elements, *Zartmann* delivered a performance that felt both personal and energetic. His fanbase is growing quickly, and it was clear that many people had come mainly to see him. The crowd at his performance was by far the largest of the evening. While the set wasn’t overly dramatic, it had a slow-building momentum that peaked with the crowd singing along to his closing tracks. “He really pulled everyone in by the end,” one festival-goer said. “Perfect closing vibe.”

Throughout the day, many described the mood as vibrant, friendly, and positive. “It’s just good energy,” someone said while sharing fries with a group of strangers. “People talk to each other, and nobody’s being weird or aggressive.” Another guest commented: “What makes it special is that it’s not just about the artists, it’s the whole feeling. You run into friends everywhere, meet new people, and everything feels laid back but exciting.”

The Awareness Teams were also visible again this year, wearing purple vests and helping people who felt uncomfortable, unwell, or unsafe. In the last few years, the festival has made a strong effort to improve safety and create a space where everyone can enjoy the event equally.

Especially in light of this, one could also sense a more serious debate among some festival guests. One of the headlining acts on the lineup, the popular indie pop band *Jeremias*, had recently been involved in controversy. Their former photographer was accused by several fans, including minors, of requesting nude photos in exchange for special access to the band.




These accusations became widely known on Instagram a couple of months back, with screenshots and personal stories circulating among followers.

Initially, the band continued to work with the photographer. But after growing public criticism and increasing pressure, they eventually ended the professional relationship. While some guests acknowledged that this was the right step, others questioned why it took so long. One person said they still enjoy the music but hoped the band had learned from the situation. Another guest said the delay in action created doubts about the band's values and that she was no longer listening to their music.

When a band like *Jeremias* is invited to perform, it challenges how consistently awareness policies are applied. A festival should reflect the values of the communities it represents, and even though the band eventually cut ties with the photographer, their delayed response raised important questions about how festivals apply their awareness and safety principles in practice. Especially for a festival that speaks openly about safety, inclusion, and respect, situations like these become part of the conversation, even (and especially) after the last lights go out.

The Campus Festival at TU Dresden 2025 was a day full of music, joy, and bonding. But it also showed that celebrations do not exist outside of real-world issues. As the festival continues to grow and evolve, so do the responsibilities of all people connected with it.



BALANCING BOOKS AND BARBELLS: A STUDENT'S GUIDE TO FITNESS AND ACADEMIC SUCCESS


Maximilian Löper

8:00 AM: alarms go off, students get ready and venture out to their study halls. After attending two lengthy lectures, some might find the time to hurriedly grab something to eat before rushing off to their next seminar. Then comes group work on a presentation while stressing out over the essay due next week. What's next? After days like these, most students favor their dorms and a peaceful, relaxed evening. Yet, for me, this is where my day truly begins. That's when I lace up my gym shoes and get ready to squeeze in one more rep after a challenging day at university.

Balancing a fitness-centered lifestyle with university demands is a constant juggling act. It feels exhausting and overwhelming at times, yet, under the right conditions, endlessly rewarding. With a focused mindset and structured approach, it's not only possible but highly beneficial. This guide explores how to maintain a healthy balance between training and university life, highlighting the mental rewards it offers while also warning against hidden pressures.

Some might say, "Why should I even care about fitness or going to the gym? I'm not trying to become Arnold Schwarzenegger." Yet, the benefits of regular exercise go far beyond building muscle. Numerous studies have shown that regular physical activity significantly boosts cognitive and neurological function. Exercise can improve concentration, focus, memory, processing speed, and overall executive functioning. These aren't just abstract claims backed by brain scans - they're noticeable in daily life. For me, the gym offers a rare moment of mental peace. For one and a half to two hours each day, I feel free from the stress, complications, and worries of university and life. Physical activity becomes a form of therapy, a mental reset that clears the mind. It also acts as a powerful stress reliever. Channeling mental pressure into physical effort triggers the release of endorphins, improving mood and lowering stress levels, which is especially helpful during stressful exam season.

Even though the benefits of regular exercise are well known, it's easy




dismiss the gym as something which there's just no time for. But with a bit of planning, fitness can absolutely fit into a busy student schedule. First, no one expects you to train every single day. A few sessions a week are already enough to enjoy many of the benefits. Planning your week in advance helps. Decide when you'll study, attend lectures, and hit the gym. While not every day will look the same, having a flexible structure is helpful. Consider working out during breaks between lectures or at times when you feel most productive. Some people thrive on early-morning workouts; others might prefer evenings. The same goes for study habits. The key is to create a routine that works for you and stick to it consistently.



While I stand by exercise as a mental health booster, it can also become harmful when driven by

unrealistic ideals, toxic comparisons, or obsession. Improving one's health or appearance may be the original goal, but sometimes those well-intentioned motives spiral into unhealthy patterns. Many gym-goers develop body dysmorphic disorder (BDD), a mental health condition where individuals fixate on perceived flaws in their appearance - flaws often invisible to others. In the fitness world, this can evolve into muscle dysmorphia: the belief that you're never lean or muscular enough, no matter how much you train. These distorted self-perceptions are often reinforced by unrealistic beauty standards perpetuated by social media, making students and young adults particularly vulnerable. BDD can manifest as compulsive calorie counting, excessive mirror checking, seeking constant reassurance, or endlessly comparing oneself to others. It's more than just being self-conscious - it's a deep, distressing preoccupation that interferes with daily life and well-being. That's why self reflection and awareness are essential parts of a fitness lifestyle.

In a world focused on maximizing productivity, whether in the gym or your studies, it's easy to overlook




the importance of recovery. This counts for both: gym and university. Overtraining or overworking without breaks doesn't build resilience; it breaks it down. Physically, muscles need time to repair and grow stronger. Mentally, your brain consolidates memory and processes information best during rest. Sleep, downtime, and even short study or workout breaks are investments, not distractions. Building in recovery ensures not just better performance, but also greater well-being. It's okay, and even necessary, to pause. A big part of that recovery also comes from eating well. Nutritious food fuels your workouts, sharpens your concentration, and helps your body bounce back from stress. Prioritizing sleep, proper meals, and mental breaks isn't laziness - it's a smart strategy. A healthy lifestyle isn't just about what you do, but how well you recover from it.

Of course, acknowledging the mental health risks and the importance of recovery doesn't mean abandoning fitness altogether. It means approaching it with clarity and intention. That's where personal priorities come in. University and fitness don't need to conflict; they can complement each other when aligned with your long-

term goals. To avoid falling into common gym pitfalls, ask yourself, "Am I going to the gym to feel strong and confident, or to meet someone else's standard?" Finding the right balance is what truly keeps us healthy. Your priorities won't always look the same. Some days, academics need your full attention; on others, the gym can help clear your head. The most important thing is to stay flexible and honest about what you need. Juggling study, exercise, rest, and social life is a challenge only a few manage perfectly, and that's okay. How you spend your time should reflect your values, not pressure or trends. You're allowed to shift, slow down, or reset. In the end, your lifestyle should support your growth, not overwhelm it.



Fitness and academics aren't opposing forces; when approached mindfully, they can fuel each other.



By setting realistic goals, staying aware of mental health, and listening to your body and mind, you can create a lifestyle that supports your ambitions without burning out. Whether you're chasing grades, gains, or both, remember that balance is personal, not perfect. And that's what makes it sustainable. Also, remember that the gym isn't the only way to stay physically active. Team sports, walking, hiking, or riding your bike provide similar advantages to your life and mental health. So, if gym culture doesn't suit you, no worries, as the opportunities are endless. The most important thing is to keep moving - toward your goals, your health, and a version of success that's truly your own. In the end, it's not about lifting the heaviest weight or acing every exam but about building a life that feels good to live.

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Engaging Ways to Learn English



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FROM GAMES TO GAINS: THE ROLE OF GAMIFICATION IN DUOLINGO

Fenja Idun Bühler

Over 500 million people are learning new languages, not in classrooms, but through an app that feels more like a game than a textbook. Welcome to the world of Duolingo, where mastering a new language might resemble leveling up in Candy Crush more than studying from a grammar book. With bright colors, streak rewards, experience points, and daily challenges, Duolingo has transformed language learning into a playful, gamified experience. But behind the fun interface lies a deeper question: How effective is this approach for long-term language acquisition? As gamification becomes a dominant force in education technology, it's worth exploring how Duolingo uses it, and whether it's truly helping users become fluent or just keeping them hooked.

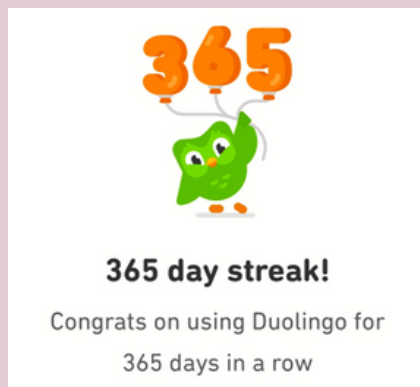
Gamification is gaining popularity across various fields, turning everyday tasks into playful, engaging experiences by incorporating game-like features. An example appears in fitness apps, which often encourage users to compete with friends, for instance, by comparing running

times to see who is faster, thereby transforming exercise into a goal-driven and interactive activity. This trend is equally visible in language learning, where gamification can take many forms. That includes everything from role-playing games that spark real conversations to grammar board games that turn dry rules into something fun and interactive. Contrary to popular belief, game-based learning is not entirely new; it is a well-established approach now evolving through digital tools. What makes it so appealing is how it taps into competition to boost motivation and uses fun to ease the stress of learning. Mobile-assisted language learning (MALL), a current trend in education, aligns well with these goals. MALL refers to learning via mobile devices such as smartphones or tablets, allowing users to study flexibly and independently. A leading example is Duolingo, a language-learning app founded in 2011. Offering more than 40 languages, Duolingo exemplifies how gamified MALL platforms can engage learners while making language learning more accessible and enjoyable.




Duolingo uses a wide range of game mechanics to make language learning both motivating and entertaining. Users begin by selecting a target language and can take a quiz if they already have prior knowledge. They then set a daily XP (experience points) goal, receiving bonuses for achieving it. XP are earned by completing lessons, providing a visible indicator of learning progress. Streaks reward daily practice by tracking consecutive days of study. If users miss a day, the streak resets to zero, reinforcing consistent engagement. Leaderboards encourage competition by ranking users based on XP, while achievements and gems (the in-game currency) are awarded for specific accomplishments and can be exchanged for rewards like outfits or bonus lessons. Duolingo also uses hearts as lives: making too many mistakes during lessons causes users to lose hearts, adding an extra challenge. Occasionally, the app offers optional challenges, such as maintaining a streak for a set number of days or outperforming others in a given league, with additional rewards upon completion. The lesson system is structured around topics like family, food, and travel, introducing grammar and cultural elements through vocabulary drills and

exercises such as translation, multiple-choice questions, and spelling. Learners can practice a variety of skills, including reading, writing, listening, translating, and speaking. The app's colorful design, vivid animations, and a cast of characters, some of whom users can even interact with, enhance the playful learning experience. Duo, the green owl mascot, encourages learners with animated prompts. Social features like connecting with friends, sharing achievements, and sending motivational nudges further boost engagement.



Furthermore, AI-powered personalization tailors the learning journey, using techniques like spaced repetition to reinforce memory. Push notifications and reminders serve as triggers to return, completing a habit loop of trigger (notification), action (lesson), and reward (XP, streak, visual feedback). Together, these elements make Duolingo not only



effective but also motivating over a longer term.

As noted earlier, gamified language learning, as exemplified by Duolingo, offers numerous benefits that enhance the learning experience, particularly for beginners. One of the key advantages is increased user engagement. By transforming lessons into short, interactive tasks, Duolingo makes language learning feel less daunting and more approachable. The features encourage daily use and help learners develop consistent study habits over time. Additionally, the app promotes a sense of accomplishment through visual progress indicators, which makes the process feel both productive and enjoyable.

While these features offer clear advantages, they also come with trade-offs that may affect long-term language mastery. One major concern is the risk of superficial learning, where users prioritize earning points, maintaining streaks, or climbing leaderboards over genuinely understanding the material. Furthermore, the app's design prioritizes competition over collaboration, which may affect learners who benefit more from social and cooperative learning environments. The overemphasis on external rewards may also

diminish intrinsic motivation and deeper cognitive engagement, challenging the balance between fun and meaningful learning. Moreover, Duolingo's strong focus on translation-based and repetitive exercises can lead to boredom and disengagement, particularly after the initial appeal of gamified elements fades. The app often emphasizes memorization over meaningful communication and offers limited grammar instruction and cultural context. Additionally, it prioritizes passive skills like reading and listening over active skills such as speaking and writing. As a result, many students report difficulty translating their in-app progress into real-life language use, often feeling unprepared for authentic communication outside the app. Altogether, while Duolingo is effective for beginners and supports short-term engagement, it falls short in promoting sustained, in-depth, and well-rounded language acquisition. Intermediate and advanced learners often find the content too simplistic and may stop using the platform due to its lack of depth and progression.

Nevertheless, Duolingo's success illustrates how gamification can effectively transform language learning into an engaging, daily routine. For real language mastery, learners benefit most when gamified tools like Duolingo



are complemented by real-life conversation practice, cultural immersion, and more comprehensive study methods. As educational technologies continue to evolve, the key question persists: Can gamification develop beyond surface-level incentives to support rich, meaningful language acquisition?

One promising step in this direction is Duolingo for Schools, a relatively new way of incorporating gamification into structured educational settings. This

free platform enables teachers to integrate Duolingo's game-like elements into classroom instruction via a built-in dashboard. They can create virtual classrooms, assign specific skills, and monitor detailed student progress by tracking XP earned, time spent, and task completion. Students interact with Duolingo's familiar and motivating features, such as colorful lessons, experience points, streaks, and interactive stories, all within a curriculum-aligned framework. Teachers can guide learning through targeted assignments or encourage independent exploration. As language education continues to adapt to digital trends, platforms like this could help reshape the role of gamification, not just as a hook for engagement, but as a meaningful, integrated part of the learning journey. The future of language learning may well lie in striking that balance: where playful design meets purposeful pedagogy.

LEARNING BY DOING – PAD AS A VALUABLE OPPORTUNITY FOR YOUR SEMESTER ABROAD

Fenja Idun Bühler

What if your semester abroad wasn't about lectures and libraries, but real classrooms and hands-on teaching? Not sitting in a lecture hall, but standing in front of a class. While most students picture Erasmus programs, university courses, dorm life, and weekend trips when thinking about staying abroad, the Pädagogischer Austauschdienst (PAD) offers a different path. As a German language assistant, you don't just observe education in another country, you live it. Whether you're training to become a teacher, studying languages, or simply looking for a meaningful experience, the PAD is a chance to grow professionally, culturally, and personally.

Analena Weißgerber, who is currently preparing for her final state exams in German and French teaching and is also working as the campus ambassador for the PAD, gave me helpful insights into the program. She first came across the PAD during her French studies, which



required a stay abroad. Inspired by a former ambassador and driven by curiosity, she decided to apply. "I wanted to deepen my language skills and experience the culture," she explains. "But more than that, I wanted to be in the classroom, try out teaching, and see how education works in another country." She was also interested in how students abroad perceive German and what kind of image they have of the culture.

Unlike traditional study abroad programs, the PAD is more professional and hands-on. "It's not about sitting in lectures or writing essays," says Analena Weißgerber. "It's about standing in front of a class, working with experienced teachers, and learning

how to find your own way as a teacher.” Rather than being passive observers, PAD assistants take an active role in the classroom, contributing to lessons, supporting students, and sometimes even running their own classes. At the same time, the PAD is about much more than just language teaching. It’s a cultural exchange, a chance for students abroad to meet a real person from Germany and engage with the language and culture in an authentic way. “Abroad, you’re basically Germany made real,” Analena explains. “Students see you as a German they can talk to.”


Of course, the experience isn’t without its challenges. Many participants struggle at first with settling in, finding housing, or dealing with local bureaucracy, just like with any other stay abroad. Adapting to a new school system can be confusing, especially when expectations and routines differ from those at home. “Getting to know your mentor teacher and the students takes time,” Analena admits, “but it pays off.” While some schools are highly organized and supportive, others may be more chaotic or improvisational. Still, those who stay engaged and take initiative often return home with a much clearer sense of their own abilities and goals. For many, the PAD becomes not just a

semester abroad, but a defining chapter in their personal and professional development.

Professionally, PAD participants gain valuable experience: they improve their language skills, sharpen their teaching abilities, and gain insight into a different school system. Personally, the program helps them build independence, confidence, and a sense of presence in the classroom. “You really feel like part of the school,” Analena says. “You learn when to speak up, how to organize yourself, and how to connect with students.” These are skills that go far beyond language teaching. They’re tools for life.



The experience also fosters personal growth. Living in a new country, navigating unfamiliar systems, and meeting people from different backgrounds all contribute to a deeper understanding of both the host culture and oneself. Since the weekly teaching workload is



usually around twelve hours, there's plenty of time left to explore, travel, or simply settle into a new rhythm of life.

Interested? The program is open to all native German speakers who are studying or have studied at a university. The PAD is especially great for future teachers who want experience with real classrooms and lesson planning, and for language students who want to live the language and culture they're studying. "You need at least four semesters of study," says Analena, "but most importantly, you have to be open-minded and curious. You need to want to meet new people, try new things, and be proactive." The PAD offers placements in 13 countries, including Australia, France, Italy, Norway, the United States, the United Kingdom, and many more. In most countries, you'll be working in schools, but in the US, placements are only available at university level. Stays usually last between 6 and 11 months, depending on the school calendar. You can even apply more than once. Participants can receive up to €1,500 in support, depending on where they go. BAföG isn't available during the assistantship, but housing allowance or child benefits might be. Analena recommends saving a bit beforehand, just in case.

online and fairly straightforward. This year's deadlines are November 11, 2025, for the US and January 6, 2026, for all other countries. To apply, you'll need to upload a motivation letter, your CV, an academic transcript, and an academic reference, typically provided by Sandra Erdmann. You can only submit your application once all documents have been uploaded successfully. If your application stands out, you may be invited to an interview. This is conducted partly in German and partly in the language of the country you're applying to. After the interview, you'll need a bit of patience. Final decisions are usually announced around May or June. If that sounds scary, don't worry: there's lots of support and interview tips on the PAD website and their Instagram.

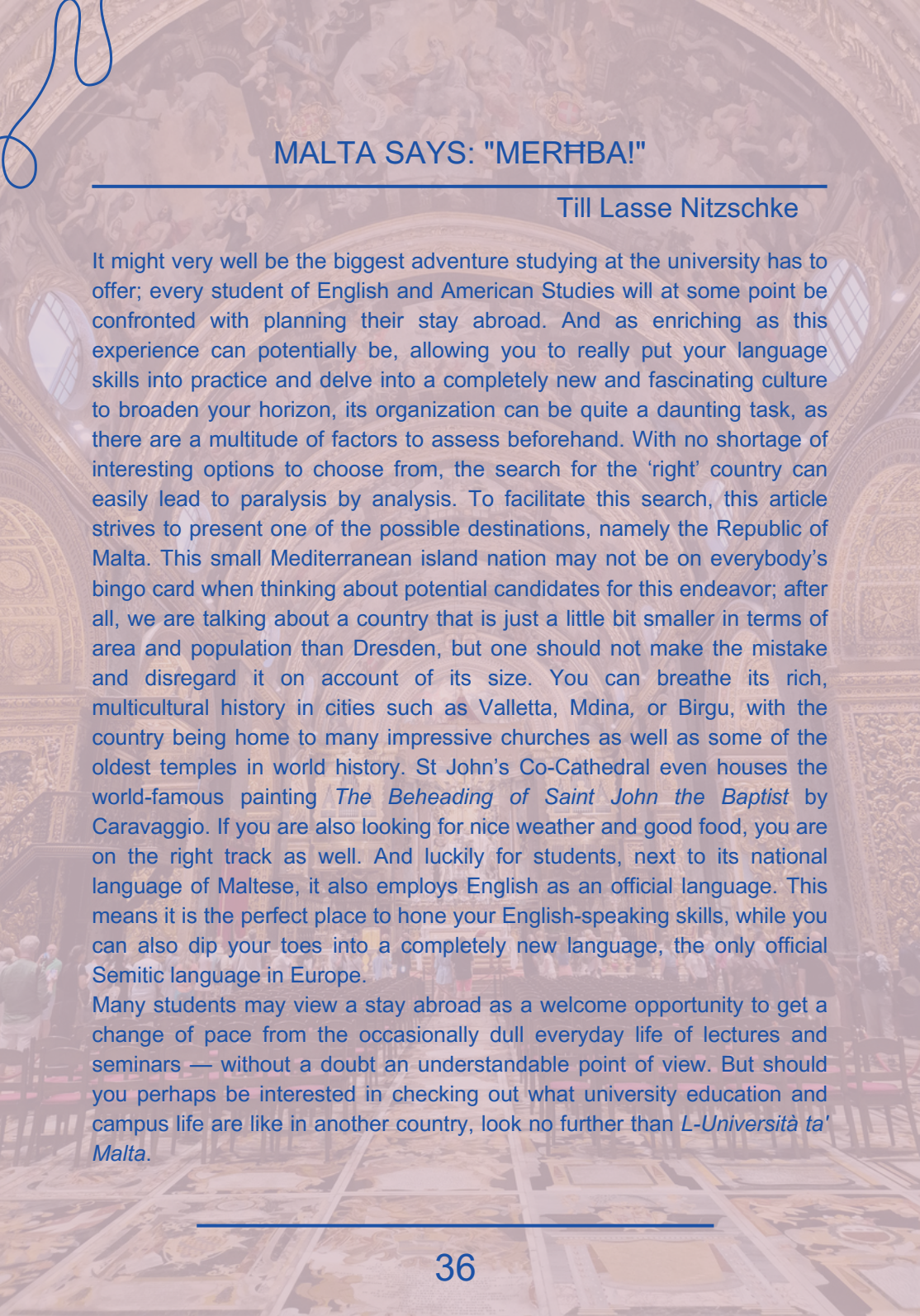
So, what's Analena's final advice? "Just do it." Especially for future teachers, the PAD is a great way to see how education works in other countries, build real teaching skills, and grow as a person. "You learn so much, not just about the foreign school system, but also about how teachers communicate, how students behave, and even what the teachers' lounge is like in another country. It's a whole new world."

The application process is fully

If you're interested, feel free to

contact Analena via email at dresden@fsa-pad.de, check out the official PAD website, or join an info session in the winter semester (watch out for emails from your student council). Whether you want to become a teacher or just want a unique experience abroad, the PAD could be your chance to truly learn by doing.





MALTA SAYS: "MERHBA!"

Till Lasse Nitzschke

It might very well be the biggest adventure studying at the university has to offer; every student of English and American Studies will at some point be confronted with planning their stay abroad. And as enriching as this experience can potentially be, allowing you to really put your language skills into practice and delve into a completely new and fascinating culture to broaden your horizon, its organization can be quite a daunting task, as there are a multitude of factors to assess beforehand. With no shortage of interesting options to choose from, the search for the 'right' country can easily lead to paralysis by analysis. To facilitate this search, this article strives to present one of the possible destinations, namely the Republic of Malta. This small Mediterranean island nation may not be on everybody's bingo card when thinking about potential candidates for this endeavor; after all, we are talking about a country that is just a little bit smaller in terms of area and population than Dresden, but one should not make the mistake and disregard it on account of its size. You can breathe its rich, multicultural history in cities such as Valletta, Mdina, or Birgu, with the country being home to many impressive churches as well as some of the oldest temples in world history. St John's Co-Cathedral even houses the world-famous painting *The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist* by Caravaggio. If you are also looking for nice weather and good food, you are on the right track as well. And luckily for students, next to its national language of Maltese, it also employs English as an official language. This means it is the perfect place to hone your English-speaking skills, while you can also dip your toes into a completely new language, the only official Semitic language in Europe.

Many students may view a stay abroad as a welcome opportunity to get a change of pace from the occasionally dull everyday life of lectures and seminars — without a doubt an understandable point of view. But should you perhaps be interested in checking out what university education and campus life are like in another country, look no further than *L-Università ta' Malta*.

The University of Malta is the main public university in the country; as such, it covers a wide variety of study programs. It is also located quite centrally; indeed, unlike the campus of the TU Dresden, which is spread out substantially, pretty much everything is located around the campus ring, including institutions such as the cafeteria, library, or even its own chapel. Unsurprisingly, just like the country, the university is also on the smaller side of things; do not be surprised to hear that a seminar of 20 students may be considered quite packed. Yet, this fosters a very personal learning environment, as it also coincides with a relatively relaxed relationship between students and lecturers. As a visiting or auditing student, you will be lent a helping hand to quickly get accustomed to campus life. Located directly next to the main campus in Msida is the Campus Hub, which provides abundant student housing, and its central piazza is also home to numerous eateries and shops, as well as entertainment, for example, public screenings of football matches. Still, even if you do not live close to the university, the large number of bus lines should allow you to get there comfortably. You should be aware of the infrastructural challenges inherent to Malta; because the population density is one of the highest in the world, Maltese traffic can be notoriously chaotic; as such, while the small scale of Malta makes it tempting to walk many distances, you are well-advised to get comfortable with the bus lines. Hence, applying for a tallinja card for a one-time flat fee should be at the very top of your list of priorities, as this will allow you to use most of the public transport system, such as bus and ferry lines, free of additional charge. This will make your life so much easier. Keep in mind, though, that you might have trouble getting a bus after midnight; in this case, you will have to consider paying for an Uber or Bolt ride if you do not want to walk. Importantly, when your bus arrives, do not forget to give a hand signal at the bus stop; otherwise, you may get ignored by the bus driver. Obviously, for your safety, you should also take into account that, because of its British past, Malta has left-hand traffic, so do not get that mixed up.



Now, the question of the country is only one aspect of organizing a stay abroad; choosing a favorable time must not be neglected either. In the case of Malta, you cannot go wrong with any time frame, as the whole year round, there are so-called festas all around the country.

It is no overstatement to say that the Maltese people really know how to celebrate; pretty much every town, no matter how big or small, has its own special dates, where young and old come together to have a good time. Then, a magnificent statue from the respective church is carried through the town, with the townspeople as well as a marching band accompanying it. As the Maltese are also big fans of fireworks, these are also a common sight at festas.



These events are of great value for experiencing the Maltese culture, as these are perfect opportunities to mingle with the locals, and you are sure to be infected by the lively, carefree atmosphere. There is a particularly high density of festivities in summer, but you should be warned that the Maltese summer can get extremely hot. A special recommendation can be made for going to Malta during springtime; this will allow you to experience exciting events, such as the Maltese Carnival or the annual Malta International Fireworks Festival. As already mentioned, the Maltese love fireworks, and you will believe this when you see it, as this is truly a spectacle. Furthermore, if you want to witness something unique, you really should visit Malta at Easter, as the entire Holy Week is a very special experience. You will find few places where Easter is celebrated as exuberantly as it is here. Bells are ringing everywhere, except for Good Friday, when the characteristic wooden sound of the Ċuqlajta echoes through the city instead. Processions take place everywhere with dozens of people wearing elaborate costumes. It all culminates on Easter Sunday, when the merriness is at its peak with lots of music, lots of food and drink, and, of course, lots of fun. It is always a particular sight to behold when the statue bearers run with the heavy statue while the crowd cheers frenetically. Moreover, the Easter specialty figolla is shared among the people, which you should not miss, as it is very sweet and very delicious!

No matter which time you choose to go or which town you choose to live in, you will quickly become enamored with both the fascinating culture permeating the whole country and the incredible hospitality of the Maltese people, whose warmth may actually rival the Maltese sunshine.

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Real Lives behind the Reputation



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FROM CRIB TO CAMPUS, BETWEEN LECTURE HALLS AND LULLABIES - STUDYING WITH A CHILD AT TU DRESDEN

Johanna Buchmann

"Having children is like living in a frat house – nobody sleeps, everything's broken, and there's a lot of throwing up."

– Ray Romano

A morning filled with diaper changes and lecture notes, naptimes, and seminar prep – for student parents at TU Dresden, life is a daily balancing act between academic responsibilities and family life.

Studying with a child is both a challenge and a unique experience, especially at a university like TU Dresden, where students are offered a range of support systems to help them combine academic life and parenting. While the idea of attending lectures in the morning and reading bedtime stories at night may sound inspiring, in reality, student parents often struggle to keep both roles in balance.


To begin with, time management is one of the biggest issues.

Many lectures and seminars are scheduled during the same hours that childcare services are available, and often, parents find themselves in a conflict between being present at university and being there for their child.



In addition, the lack of sleep due to nighttime parenting can seriously affect a student's ability to concentrate and perform well in class. Moreover, children tend to get sick unexpectedly, which can completely change a carefully planned study week, and force students to cancel attendance or reschedule assignments. On top of that, financial stress is a constant factor, as living expenses increase significantly with a child and many student jobs do not offer enough flexibility or pay.

However, TU Dresden offers several ways to support student parents, which helps reduce some of these pressures.

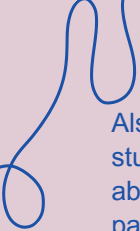


One central contact point is the Campus Office “Uni mit Kind,” where students can get advice on parental leave, child benefits, BAföG, and local childcare options. This office not only helps with information but also offers a welcoming space where parents can meet others in similar situations. In addition, the campus itself provides helpful facilities like nursing rooms, changing tables, and a special playroom where children can stay safely while their parents attend short events or meetings. Another important offer is the “Campusnest,” a short-term childcare service that allows student parents to leave their children in professional care during a lecture or an exam. Besides that, some student housing is designed for families, and the canteen offers low-cost meals for children, which supports daily life on campus. These physical and organizational structures play a big role in making university more accessible to parents.

When it comes to financial aspects, student parents in Germany can benefit from several forms of support. First of all, students who receive BAföG can apply for an extra childcare supplement, which is a monthly, non-repayable amount that helps cover the cost of raising a child.

In addition, all parents are entitled to child benefit (Kindergeld), regardless of their employment status. This is currently about 250 euros per month per child, and it continues until the child turns 18, or 25 if they are still in education. Furthermore, parental allowance (Elterngeld) is available even to students without income, and usually starts at 300 euros per month. It can be received for up to 14 months and does not affect BAföG calculations. On top of these basic payments, TU Dresden also offers a small one-time pregnancy grant and meal vouchers through the Campus Office. Students in special situations can apply for additional help, for example from the “Mutter und Kind”-Stiftung or through the city’s support for families with low income.

Another important issue for student parents is academic flexibility. Since sometimes when children become sick and need to be cared for at home, parents might have to miss classes, exams, or assignment deadlines. Fortunately, the examination regulations at TU Dresden are family-friendly, and many faculties accept sick notes or allow students to reschedule exams or extend deadlines. This kind of flexibility is essential for student parents, as it allows them to catch up on missed work without being penalized or falling behind.



Also, in case of longer absences, students can take a leave of absence from university for parental reasons, without losing their student status or financial aid. In terms of social life, many student parents experience both isolation and connection. On the one hand, it can be hard to join social events or participate in spontaneous study groups when you have to pick up your child from daycare or cook dinner at a certain time. This often leads to feelings of being left out or disconnected from the traditional student experience. On the other hand, parenting opens the door to new networks. Events organized by the Campus Office or peer groups of student parents offer the chance to meet like-minded people, share experiences, and build supportive friendships. In some cases, these networks become even stronger than regular student friendships because they are based on shared challenges and deeper understanding.

Looking at the overall experience, it becomes clear that studying with a child has both advantages and disadvantages. On the positive side, student parents learn to organize their time efficiently, set clear priorities, and grow personally through the responsibility of parenthood.

They also benefit from special financial aid and flexible rules at the university. Moreover, they often find new friendships and meaning in their academic work, as they are studying not only for themselves but also to create a better future for their families. On the downside, the pressure of balancing studies and family can be overwhelming, and moments of stress, exhaustion, or loneliness are common. Yet, with enough support, motivation, and access to the right resources, studying with a child can become a successful and rewarding journey. In conclusion, TU Dresden provides a solid foundation for student parents to complete their studies while raising a family, and although it is not always easy, it is definitely possible – and for many, deeply fulfilling.



THE ROADS WE TAKE: ALUMNI JOURNEYS FROM TU DRESDEN

Antonin Donath

From time to time, life as a student can feel quite disorienting. Throughout our studies, we experience ups and downs, and the path to graduation more often than not feels like a long and demanding hike.


Under these circumstances, it can be challenging not to lose sight of the ultimate goal. A reassuring thought that helps me in these situations is that so many other students at this university have faced similar struggles and managed to overcome them. And as heterogeneous as the student body is, the variety of career paths that students follow after graduating may be even more diverse. While many TUD alumni continue in the field they studied, others take unexpected turns and pursue their dreams in more unconventional jobs. No matter the career choice, our university has produced talented and successful graduates across all disciplines.

I want to highlight two of these stories, as among the many thousands of alumni TU Dresden has produced, many intriguing journeys remain underappreciated.

When Janina Dill graduated from TU Dresden in 2005, the world looked quite different. The internet was still in its infancy, the German Pope Benedict XVI had just been elected, and the fourth *Harry Potter* movie had hit cinemas worldwide. Most of all, however, the global political and economic landscape has changed drastically over the past 20 years, and few people have followed these developments more closely than Janina Dill.

Born and raised in Hannover, Janina chose to start her academic career in Dresden, making her an unusual example of a young West German woman pursuing her degree in East Germany. This decision didn't hinder her, in fact, it gave her the opportunity to enroll in one of TU's most exclusive programs. The bachelor's program "International Relations" accepts only a fraction of applicants: in 2024, only 39 of 429 applications were successful. Back in 2002, Janina Dill was among those lucky few.

Her studies led her to some of the world's most respected institutions, from an internship at Germany's United Nations office in New York to the University of Cambridge, where she completed her Master's degree in 2007 in less than a year.



While many gifted individuals pursue careers in other, financially more rewarding sectors, Janina chose to dedicate her life to academia. After spending time at some of the world's most respected universities, she became Professor of Global Security at the University of Oxford.

Years later, Janina is not only an alumna of TU Dresden but also one of the most respected voices in matters of global security worldwide. While her general research focus lies on the role of morality and law in war, she is currently working on a project that highlights the determination of the Ukrainian people to resist Russia's war of aggression, in light of contradictory statements made by US President Donald Trump.

Especially with the ongoing wars in the Middle East and Ukraine, Janina Dill's research on the psychological effects of war has become more relevant than ever, making her a regular guest on international media platforms such as CNN and the BBC.


That a successful career doesn't always have to be as linear as Janina Dill's is shown by the example of Sylva-Michèle Sternkopf. In 1992, she began her studies at TU Dresden with the goal of becoming an English and German teacher. After teaching for two years at a Gymnasium in Flöha, however, she decided to call it quits and seek her luck elsewhere.

After a short stint as a linguistics lecturer back at TU Dresden, she earned her doctorate in business communication and went on to found "Sternkopf Communications", a multilingual agency specializing in international storytelling and branding.

In 2006, Sternkopf and her company gained national attention with the launch of her " Erotische Engel" ("Erotic Angels") - a series of hand-carved wooden figures inspired by the traditional angels of the Erzgebirge, combined with a very unconventional approach to classical Christmas ornaments.

This provocative project sparked discussions about the modernization of regional craftsmanship and alleged mockery of Christian values. While the angel collection made Sylva's name and company nationally recognizable, her main focus still lies with "Sternkopf Communications", as she stated in an interview with TU Dresden's alumni program.

Additionally, in 2005, Sylva and her husband bought the "Villa Gückelsberg" in Flöha and rebuilt it into one of Saxony's most sought-after wedding venues, while also maintaining it as the company's headquarters. This marks just the latest of many unexpected turns Sylva's professional life has taken. As she said herself in 2020: "I would never have dreamed that I would also become a wedding planner."



And while Janina Dill followed a relatively straight and prestigious academic path that led her to some of the world's most renowned institutions, Sylva-Michèle Sternkopf chose to stay rooted in the region and, through a series of detours, also found purpose and success in life.

The examples of these two extraordinary women show that, as tough and challenging as university life often is, countless opportunities lie ahead, many of which we cannot yet imagine. Whether in Dresden or somewhere else in the world, whether as linear as Janina's journey or as unexpected as Sylva's, both stories remind us that success doesn't follow a single path and that sometimes, the most unexpected turns lead you exactly where you belong.



“EXCELLENCE FOR WHOM?” – RETHINKING PRESTIGE AT TU DRESDEN

Johanna Buchmann

“The Excellence Strategy strengthens research – but weakens the idea of the university as a place for all forms of knowledge.”

— adapted from critical statements by the GEW (German Education Union)

In 2012, TU Dresden was awarded a title that only a handful of German universities carry: “Excellence University.” For the university administration and much of the public, the label marks an unambiguous success story — one of international visibility, cutting-edge research, and millions in competitive funding. On banners, websites, and in press releases, the designation is used like a seal of academic quality.

Yet behind the polished messaging lies a more complicated reality. While the Excellence Strategy has undoubtedly strengthened high-level research, its effects on the wider academic landscape — particularly on the humanities, language studies, and teacher education — have been more ambiguous. Critics argue that the very notion of “excellence”

promoted by the program privileges certain types of knowledge, methods, and disciplines at the expense of others.



What Is the Excellence Strategy?

The “Exzellenzstrategie” is a federally coordinated funding program designed to promote internationally competitive research in Germany. Replacing the earlier “Exzellenzinitiative”(2006–2017), it consists of two major pillars: “Clusters of Excellence,” which are interdisciplinary research consortia funded for seven years with up to €50 million each, and the title “University of Excellence,” granted to institutions with an overarching future concept that builds on at least two active Clusters.



TU Dresden currently hosts three Clusters of Excellence:

- CeTI (Centre for Tactile Internet with Human-in-the-Loop) – focusing on cyber-physical systems and human-machine interaction
- PoL (Physics of Life) – dealing with biological matter and emergent life processes
- ct.qmat (Complexity and Topology in Quantum Matter) – in collaboration with the University of Würzburg

These initiatives have undoubtedly brought international prestige and significant funding to the university. The strategic plan *TUD 2028 – Synergy and Beyond* outlines further efforts to integrate these clusters into the university's broader mission.


However, as sociologist Richard Münch pointed out in his landmark critique of “academic capitalism,” excellence frameworks are rarely neutral. They not only direct funding but also shape academic values, redefine priorities, and restructure institutional hierarchies (Münch, 2014). And at TU Dresden, these dynamics are increasingly visible.

Disciplinary Divides: Who Gets Funded, and Who Gets Left Behind?

One could argue that when you hear ‘Excellence’, you think of AI labs, not gender theory, seminars on post colonialism or language teaching - but why is that?

Although the Excellence Strategy is presented as a system of meritocratic selection, the criteria it uses — such as the ability to attract large grants, demonstrate technological innovation, and form international networks — tend to favor STEM disciplines. This structural bias is evident in the distribution of research funding across faculties.

According to data from the DFG Funding Atlas 2021, over 80% of third-party research funding at TU Dresden goes to faculties in engineering, physics, and life sciences. The Philosophical Faculty, which includes departments such as history, linguistics, and literary studies, receives a fraction of that. Even within the Excellence clusters, the involvement of social or cultural disciplines is minimal, and often limited to peripheral tasks like ethics oversight or science communication.



The result is not just financial inequality, but a growing perception — within and outside the university — that some fields are inherently more valuable than others. As TU Dresden’s promotional material leans heavily on keywords like “innovation,” “digital transformation,” and “technological leadership,” disciplines concerned with cultural critique, language acquisition, or educational theory are rendered invisible.


This invisibility has concrete consequences: fewer permanent positions, lower publication budgets, and fewer opportunities for early-career researchers to participate in high-level grant applications. As the political scientist Gerhard A. Ritter warned during earlier debates on university reform, when funding becomes concentrated in specific areas, the broader educational mission of the university is endangered.

The View from Below: Teaching Under Pressure

Another major tension within the Excellence framework is the growing disjuncture between research and teaching. While the clusters bring in external money and reputational gain, they often have little direct impact on undergraduate or even master’s-level education. Indeed, many of the researchers funded by these clusters work in labs or centers detached from the regular departmental structure.

Meanwhile, teaching in fields such as literature, pedagogy, philosophy, and languages continues under increasing pressure. Seminar sizes have grown, digital resources are outdated, and student demand for thesis supervision often exceeds what departments can provide. These issues are especially pronounced in teaching degree programs (Lehramt), where students are trained to become educators but encounter limited opportunities to connect theory with current research developments.

While TU Dresden has made some investments in didactics and e-learning tools — particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic — these have often been emergency responses rather than strategic initiatives. The Excellence Strategy, as it is currently structured, does not incentivize high-quality teaching. In fact, teaching responsibilities are often treated as obstacles to research productivity. This trend is not unique to Dresden. A 2020 report by the German Center for Higher Education Research and Science Studies



DZHW) found that early-career researchers across Germany often viewed teaching as “structurally undervalued” within institutional reward systems. But in a university that labels itself “excellent,” the neglect of teaching sends particularly contradictory signals.

Employment Conditions and Precarity in Non-STEM Fields

One of the more troubling side effects of the Excellence Strategy is the growing precarity of academic employment, particularly in non-STEM departments. While large clusters can create long-term postdoctoral positions or even tenure-track professorships, most projects in the humanities and social sciences depend on short-term contracts. Doctoral candidates may find themselves without supervision if a project ends prematurely, and postdocs often move between institutions in search of stability.


At TU Dresden, this has led to what some have described as an “internal brain drain”: talented researchers leaving the university not due to lack of ability, but due to lack of opportunity. In interviews conducted by the GEW (Gewerkschaft Erziehung und Wissenschaft), several early-career academics in humanities fields reported that they felt “structurally excluded” from the university’s vision of its future — a vision shaped largely by the rhetoric and funding streams of excellence.

Moreover, because these issues are often experienced silently — hidden within individual career paths or departmental budgets — they rarely become part of public discourse. Yet they shape the everyday experience of hundreds of students and staff.

Challenging the Narrative: Alternatives and Proposals

To be clear, the point is not to oppose research excellence. Nor is it to argue that technical and scientific innovation should be de-funded. Rather, the problem lies in the narrowing of what counts as “excellent” in the first place.

Several scholars and student organizations have called for a broader definition of excellence — one that includes contributions to democratic education, linguistic diversity, ethical deliberation, and community engagement. These are not secondary goals.



They are central to the public role of the university.

One proposed alternative is to create funding programs specifically aimed at strengthening teaching quality, interdisciplinary collaboration beyond STEM, and the integration of cultural and social perspectives into high-level research agendas. Another is to rethink the evaluation metrics used in institutional audits, allowing for more differentiated assessments that account for disciplinary diversity. Some German universities, such as Bremen and Bielefeld, have already begun experimenting with such models — allocating internal funds for “innovative teaching clusters” or expanding the definition of “impact” in funding decisions. Whether TU Dresden will follow this path remains to be seen.

Towards a More Inclusive Excellence

In its current form, the Excellence Strategy at TU Dresden has delivered many benefits. It has supported world-class research, raised the university’s international profile, and attracted talented scientists. But it has also introduced a series of tensions — disciplinary imbalances, weakened teaching structures, and growing precarity — that cannot be ignored.

If the university wishes to live up to its title not only in name but in spirit, it must broaden its understanding of excellence. That means recognizing the value of all forms of academic work, not just those that produce patents or publications in *Nature*. It means funding teaching, not just research. And it means seeing students and scholars in all departments — not just in the labs — as part of the university’s core mission.

In short, it means asking a simple question: What kind of excellence are we striving for? And who gets to be part of it?

SOURCES

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