

„Change is still happening at a snail’s pace“

An Interview with Björn Ivens about the significance of international research



Björn Ivens had his first professorship in Lausanne before assuming the position of professor for Business Administration and Management: Marketing in Bamberg. In this interview, he tells about the experience brought by the move between two countries.



Mr. Ivens, you left Germany while completing your Habilitation because you were offered your first professorship at a Swiss university in Lausanne. There were surely many reasons for this. Would you name them for us?

For starters, I’m part of a generation that grew up with international experiences: school exchanges with the USA and England, foreign internships and studies in France. Against this background, giving an international orientation to my career was only natural. Besides, nowadays, it is very difficult to receive a professorship in my field in the German market. Several years of experience abroad considerably improve your chances for a successful application at home.

University systems, internationally speaking, vary quite a bit. German-style chairs and professorships are an excep-

tion abroad. How did you experience this change?

I have gotten to know the advantages and disadvantages of alternative university structures, and this has been quite helpful. For example, the departments that exist in many places abroad particularly create a lot of benefits for research projects. Conversely, after gaining some experience abroad, you interpret the German system completely differently, and you have a different appreciation for the advantages of this system.

Was it these advantages that made you change to a German university after three years abroad?

Yes, definitely. But the decision to come back wasn’t easy, and it really required a great deal of deliberation. As with many life decisions, there are both pros

and cons, and private and professional aspects are intertwined. The decision to leave Switzerland and come to Bamberg, professionally speaking, basically had to do with three things: academic freedom, research opportunities and job security. Developing long-term fields of research requires stable conditions. I believe I've found them at the University of Bamberg.

What is your assessment of the international orientation of your new place of employment?

It was important for me not to have to give up internationality; neither in research nor in teaching. It should be clearly stated here that German universities, in international comparison, are in many ways still quite ethnocentric. In particular, the proportion of German professors is very high. Even though job-postings increasingly explicitly encourage applications for professorships from foreign researchers, change is still happening at a snail's pace. Due however to its numerous mobility agreements with foreign institutions, the University of Bamberg has achieved a degree of internationality rivaled by only a few other German universities.

How does internationality figure into your own course offerings?

I personally try to contribute to the continuity and development of this international expansion by teaching half of my courses in English. This is important to me for at least two reasons. On the one hand, in the field of business administration, students' future professions are highly influenced by English. Alternating between courses in German and English prepares them for this. On the other hand, many foreign partner institutions expect English-language courses to be offered here. Oftentimes, their students don't speak enough German to be able to study exclusively in our language for a semester or a year. If English-language instruction is

lacking, their students won't come, and sooner or later the exchange will be abandoned.

But shouldn't German students initially study in „good German“ and acquire their language proficiency in foreign language courses?

I don't accept this old argument. Foreign language instructors can only know and teach the technical language of different fields to a limited extent. Subject-specific training has to be carried out by instructors of the fields in question. I don't see the fact that these instructors may not be native speakers as being a big problem. The proportion of Indian, Chinese or European professors at Anglo-American universities is quite high. Even these instructors often speak only mediocre English. For students, this is no different than the conditions in international business. German managers meet with Frenchmen, Spaniards or Russians and negotiate with them in English. This is the reality for which we ought to prepare students.

And with regard to your own research – what degree of internationality do you see here in Bamberg?

Due to modern communication media, present-day research work has become flexible and independent of location. For this reason, joint projects with my foreign research partners can be greatly advanced using email or Skype. Personal visits or meetings at conferences then serve to supplement this collaboration. Therefore, every researcher in Bamberg can basically work as internationally as he wishes.



Weitere Informationen:

www.uni-bamberg.de/bwl-marketing/forschung

