

Infotalk about Myths and Rumors at Technische Universität Berlin

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00:00:00 Introduction

“I heard that...” A conversation with Technische Universität Berlin’s Academic Advising Service about myths and rumors on choosing your degree and campus life. Hello and welcome to this audio program from the Technische Universität Berlin Academic Advising Service.

Ulrike:

Today, we want to dispel a few persistent myths and rumors about degrees and how to choose one for anyone who is interested in going to university and wants to find out more. I’m Ulrike Kretzmer, head of the Educational Outreach Office at Technische Universität Berlin, and I’m joined by Arlett Sommerfeld, an advisor at the Academic Advising Service. Good morning, Arlett.

Arlett:

Hi!

Ulrike:

Today is 19 May 2020, and due to the pandemic, we are both sitting at home talking to each other over the Internet. Arlett, what is your daily work as an academic advisor normally like, and did you always know that you wanted to become an academic advisor?

Arlett:

Normally, I would now be in the office at Technische Universität in the Main Building on Straße des 17. Juni, and I’d probably be taking care of some communications stuff, i.e. publicizing our events to you out there, and would then probably be getting myself mentally

and emotionally ready to be on hand as a contact person for questions during the drop-in hours from 2 p.m. That's what would be happening.

Ulrike:

And did you know you wanted to be an academic advisor when you were a little girl?

Arlett:

No, no. I've done lots of different jobs that have all had something to do with giving people advice and support. I think I probably wouldn't have said that as a six-year-old. But it's something that I've always enjoyed to some extent. I'd worked in the university context before and, when I moved, I came to Technische Universität to work in the Academic Advising Service because everything I'd done previously had related to that.

Ulrike:

And you also have experience of doing a degree yourself. What did you study and what kind of university did you go to?

Arlett:

I've studied at various universities, which perhaps shows that I myself was not quite clear on what path I wanted to take from the beginning. I didn't start right after my *Abitur*; I tried out a few things for a few years, and that meant I could rule out subjects that I'd initially thought I might enjoy. I then studied linguistic and cultural mediation abroad, which was a mix of business, intercultural issues and language. It was at the time when bachelor's and master's degrees were just in their infancy in Germany, so courses were switching from *Diplom* to these two-tier degrees. It wasn't so easy to find a master's degree that followed on from the bachelor's degree I had. So I did another one that was also interdisciplinary, and involved some mechanical engineering and cultural studies, and lots of options that I was able to choose myself. So it was a really broad study program, which, I think, led directly to where I am now, in the Academic Advising Service, because here I can really put to use the expertise I have in different subject areas and, most of all, help people work things through. I got a really good idea of these challenges through the course of my studies.

Ulrike:

I'll also say a bit about why I'm doing this podcast. I'm the head of the Educational Outreach Office at Technische Universität. I generally don't work with high school student themselves but with their teachers. I talk to them about what they can do with their classes at Technische Universität, and what is available to high school students, such as information talks at the Academic Advising Service. I didn't really have a specific goal in mind when I started at university. I did museum studies at a university of applied sciences in Berlin. That was also the first semester you could do a bachelor's degree, and after that, I came to

Technische Universität Berlin for a master's in History and Culture of Science and Technology. That wasn't directly aimed at working in educational outreach either. But I'd already been working in the Educational Outreach Office as a student assistant for five years, and that's how I ended up in my job at Technische Universität.

00:04:13 [Why is it useful to talk about myths and rumors with prospective students?](#)

Ulrike:

Now we know a bit more about who we are, why we're talking about this today, and why we are experts in this – or at least I'm an expert in asking questions. You originally came up with the topic of myths and rumors for our lecture series "A road map to studying at university" ("*Wegweiser Studium*"), if I remember correctly. How did you come up with the topic, and why is it important to you to talk to high school students who are interested in doing a degree?

Arlett:

Just a quick note about "A road map to studying at university": This is an event series that we offer at Technische Universität every semester. One afternoon a week, we give a talk on a specific topic that we see coming up again and again, particularly in our drop-ins, and where we see a need to give people more information. Ordinarily, the Technische Universität Information Days (*Infotage*) would have taken place at the end of May, and we'd be considering whether it might be an idea to address some myths and rumors, i.e. misinformation, or incomplete information, which come up often in our advice sessions. These are things where the information seems to have come from the student grapevine, i.e. someone has said that you have to do such and such a thing, and the people coming to us for advice are at a bit of a loss what to do with the information. Some might even rule out entire degree paths because they think they don't meet the admission requirements or something like that. So because so much misinformation and myths and rumors are circulating, and some are very persistent, this can mean that people don't end up going down paths that might be the right ones for them. And that would be a shame from our perspective at Academic Advising, as well as for the people who come to us for advice. That's why we thought it would be a good idea to have a discussion about it.

Ulrike:

Can you say based on your... how long have you been an academic advisor for now?

Arlett:

I've been working at Technische Universität in the Academic Advising Service since 2012, but before that I advised students at another university about stays abroad. So, I would say I've been working in advisory contexts at universities for about 15 years in total. It's really the

case that sometimes things don't get laid to rest. There are rumors that I first heard ten years ago that are still around today.

Ulrike:

Are these isolated cases or do they come up a lot? How often do you have someone in front of you where you have to begin by unpicking a misconception they have?

Arlett:

I would definitely say this comes up on a regular basis, and I would say it's probably the case for all my colleagues. Because we have these recurring conversations about the kinds of questions that repeat themselves in our advisory work: "How do admissions work?", "Do I know what I need to know about admissions?", or "Should I go to a traditional academic university or a university of applied sciences?". Personally, I would say that these issues tend to come up the most for people who are in the process of deciding whether to go to a degree at all and are asking themselves: "What should I do? What subject would I be suited for? What can I imagine myself doing?" In that context, they also have to think about all the external factors and admissions requirements, which play into their decision as to what to study – it's all quite complex. High school students who are faced with this decision have to know quite a lot and are presented with a lot of information, and that's when potential inaccuracies and misconceptions can creep in that they should double check on.

Ulrike:

Do you have a sense of where these misconceptions come from in the first place? Somebody must be telling them these things. A lot of my understanding of what university was like came from series that I used to watch. So I had a very American idea of what it was like, because on *Gilmore Girls* and *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, it was mostly characters that went to somewhere like Harvard: It was about scholarships and sororities and living on campus. So my idea of what university was like was really influenced by that. And I didn't have so many people around me who could tell me what it was really like. Professional and higher education orientation ("*Berufs- und Studienorientierungskonzepte*") wasn't around [in Germany] when I went to school. Where do the misconceptions come from nowadays?

Arlett:

I agree with what you said: Back then, when we did our *Abitur*, you didn't have the kind of guidance on careers and higher education that you have now [in Germany]; that didn't really come up at my high school either. I can remember we had to do these internships in companies. But I never saw the inside of a university before I decided to do a degree. Or at least I don't actively remember it. I think it's a factor if you live in a more remote area and the nearest university is a couple of hours away; it's more difficult to visit. So, on the one hand, these misconceptions arise because there isn't that ease of access, and, on the other,

high schools aren't necessarily prioritizing it. And it might also be the case that you don't have anyone close to you – that was the case in my family, for example – who can talk about the ten years they spent at university. My family – my siblings and parents – hadn't gone to university, so I couldn't ask anyone what it was like. And I first went to university abroad. So I really knew nobody who knew about studying in Denmark. Lots of people don't have anyone to ask who can speak from experience, or they live in remote areas where they don't have a major city with a university on their doorstep and can just go take a look one afternoon. And going back to what you said about TV: I'm not sure if this is so relevant for university, but I know from colleagues who give careers advice in the context of demand-driven vocational courses that career aspirations shift depending on the reality show that is currently on TV. I can also remember there was a time at university when people would talk a lot about how to become a profiler, and it was a period when there was a real trend for crime series. So I agree that these things are connected. The other thing – and I can't really pin this down for sure – but I would say based on the advisory sessions here in Berlin that many people know someone who told them something and maybe they started a degree at some point, and when you ask, "Are they still at university then?", you get the answer, "Well, I don't really know." So people have just heard something and then come to a conclusion based on it, and this is taken as cast-iron information that they use to make a decision or for the actual application they're doing. So they're sort of half-truths, you might say, and generally you can work out where the information came from. It's usually not wrong exactly, but you can understand why someone might have misunderstood. And it is just not quite the right way to take the information in that context. So it needs supplementing in some way or maybe just updating because the information is eight years old. And you can only do that if you really go to a university, get advice, and talk to people who are doing the exact same subject that you want to do that year. So it's often not that easy.

Ulrike:

It's probably becoming clear from what we've been saying that it's been a while since we started at university. When I applied for my first university subject, I don't think I even used Uni Assist. So, of course, things have changed a bit over time. And to get a bit of a feel for how current high school juniors and seniors are doing, and what's on their minds, we thought we would do an online survey to feed into our conversation today. I sent it around to our high school contacts, and we reckoned that if we could get about seven or eight responses, it would be pretty cool, and we'd be able to talk about it. We got 80 responses. Thank you so much to everyone who sent us something, and thanks as well to the person who evaluated the survey. I was really pleased – it made me smile. We sent around two questions. The first one was: "When you think of doing a degree, what ideas and images come to mind?" The second question was: "In order to decide whether I should I do a degree and, if so, what it should be in, I need to..." They were both free text questions, so you could

just write whatever came to mind without us predefining what the response should look like. We've gone through them and summarized them, and because I've lumped them all together in this way it might sound a bit over the top in places. But I've picked out a few myths and rumors and am now going to ask our expert, Ms. Sommerfeld from the Academic Advising Service, what she makes of each of them – whether she's heard it before, whether it's true or false or half-true, and where you can find accurate information about it. Are you ready for the first myth?

Arlett:

Yes.

Ulrike:

OK, for the first one, I thought we'd start more generally: people's ideas about campuses.

00:13:49 “Campuses are always huge.”

Ulrike:

I've summarized it as: “A university is huge; it has lots of buildings with large lecture halls and rooms for practical work. There is a canteen, a cafeteria and libraries.”

Arlett:

That's exactly what I would say. That's true for all universities. And it is 100 percent the case if you study in Berlin. The universities are big here. Another thing to bear in mind is that the campus is not in one place but is actually spread out over several parts of the city. Sometimes that's not unimportant, because it can mean that you have to travel back and forth between different parts of the city for classes – assuming you're not doing them at home as is the case right now. What I would add, however, is that the people who come to us for advice are sometimes a bit surprised when it comes to universities of applied sciences – which, like other universities, offer academic qualifications like bachelor's and master's degrees; it's just they have a more practical orientation – and that they are significantly smaller. Their campuses usually feel a bit more homely than the high school students who come to us had expected. You are often in smaller groups in lecture halls, and certainly not with 850 other people, which definitely happens at university.

Ulrike:

I can confirm that. I did my bachelor's degree at a university of applied sciences, and when I switched to a more academic university for my master's degree, it was a completely different experience. It was much bigger, and the first time I saw a really big lecture hall was at Technische Universität. It was a completely different feeling. I also had smaller classes, a set timetable, and that kind of thing. We'll definitely touch on that a bit more. So when high

school groups visit us and walk around campus afterwards, they often get the impression that it is huge, but I don't think it's really that big.

Arlett:

That's a really important point actually. I was just thinking – because we were talking earlier about our own choice of degree: I was actually in very small groups both in my first degree in Denmark and then back in Germany in my second degree. It was really exciting because I had always pictured it like that too: large lecture halls, a feeling of anonymity, and so on. And that actually wasn't the case for me for most of my studies, because the groups were really small – just like you said they were in the programs you did. So it can vary quite a lot depending on the subject. But I think generally you can assume that it is actually true to a certain extent, and so the first important piece of advice would be to go take a look if you're in any doubt. That's always possible at public universities: You can just visit them – provided, like I just mentioned, that you're not forced to stay at home because there's a pandemic.

Ulrike:

Or maybe you can even encourage your teacher to take you there to attend a lecture, or go on a campus tour, or maybe go to the Long Night of the Sciences. That's actually a great way to get to know the campus. All the buildings are open, and you can have a walk around. It may be a bit more crowded and there's more going on than usual. But something like that can be a great opportunity to check out the campus. The university of applied sciences I was at and then Technische Universität felt so different to each other, it was almost a culture shock. So that was our first – relatively harmless – myth.

00:17:14 “Lectures are overcrowded and teacher-centered.”

Ulrike:

Next, I've summarized some of the comments about lectures. First up is the idea that lecture halls are always really full of students – overflowing, in fact. You can barely find a seat, and the whole time you have to listen to a professor giving a lecture at the front of the hall while you frantically take notes. Also, people drink beer in lecture halls.

Arlett:

Yes, I've wondered where the beer thing comes from. I think it has to do with the fact that people think that everyone is always partying at university, even in lectures. But no, the bit about beer isn't true. I can say that straight off the bat. Unless maybe there's a party organized in the evening. As for the lecture halls being full, I would say, yes, especially at the start of the semester. This usually thins out a bit over the course of the lecture period during the semester. I think we said a bit about that in our first summary on what life is like on campus. It can vary enormously, and it also depends on where you are studying. At Technische Universität in particular, I'd also say that it is very dependent on the subject. It

differs depending on whether you're studying, say, Architecture, which is in a relatively large group but where you do a lot of work in teams, because you have to build a model in the workshop, or if, on the other hand, you're doing something like Industrial Engineering and Management, where you take subjects that people in other programs also have to do – say, for instance, math subjects, which anyone starting an engineering degree has to take. Those lectures are attended by several hundred people, who all sit together in the lecture hall.

Ulrike:

Do you know by heart how many seats there are in our Audimax, which is the largest lecture hall at Technische Universität? I've heard the figure so often, but...

Arlett:

I was just thinking that, too. If I'm not completely mistaken, it has a capacity of 1,300.

Ulrike:

That sounds about right. I have to say, for my history of technology degree, I don't think I was ever in a lecture hall with more than 60 people or so. It was a bit of a smaller, niche subject, and I never had a lecture in the Audimax. That was used more for lectures where several degree programs converged.

Arlett:

I'd just like to add something on that. What I found exciting was that there was a bit of a mix in my second degree, which was at the University of Magdeburg. The degree was in Cultural Studies, Knowledge Management and Logistics, and we would have cultural studies seminars in our small study group of 30 people. But we would also go to classes in other faculties like Business Informatics, Business Administration, and Economics. It was exciting, because there were days where we would start in the morning with a cultural studies seminar with 20 people. And after that, we would have a seminar in business informatics with, maybe, 50 people, and do a tutorial related to a lecture, and then we would join the economics students and learn about national accounting in the largest lecture hall on campus with up to 580 other people. It was super exciting to have that mix.

Ulrike:

I didn't experience that until I was at Technische Universität. At my university of applied sciences, I was always in the same class of around 35 people, and then when I went to Technische Universität there were suddenly lots of other people, especially in humanities subjects, including people from Humboldt Universität and Freie Universität. I also went to lectures for my elective in art history. That was outside my degree program, and it was pretty big and quite cool. I really enjoyed that. And I also sat in lectures for an elective

module in communication psychology. So there were times when I went to bigger lectures, even though they weren't actually part of my degree program.

Arlett:

Just to jump in here with my academic advisor hat on.

00:21:13 “There is a fixed course schedule.”

Arlett:

What you just said is really exciting and important, and it speaks to a myth that when you start your degree you just stick to a predetermined plan. But that's not the case, as Ulrike just said, because university presents a big opportunity: The larger the campus, the greater the choice of things you can engage in that might be outside your program. So maybe you're doing Computer Engineering, but you feel like attending two lectures in politics or cultural studies or philosophy. That's completely possible. That means that by deciding to do a degree at a university like Technische Universität, you can often choose from a much larger range of things and get your teeth into what interests you. This is particularly good to know for those with two areas of interest who aren't really sure whether they should give one up or whether that is even absolutely necessary. This is a topic that comes up a fair amount at the Academic Advising Service.

Ulrike:

So if you want to know how much flexibility you have in choosing your options within a particular course of study, you can contact the Academic Advising Service, or at Technische Universität, you could even get in touch with Course Guidance at Technische Universität – but I'm not sure that exists at all universities. It doesn't, does it?

Arlett:

It's organized differently depending on how big the university is. But there'll always be someone who is the central point of contact, and there'll also always be someone that you can get in touch with at each academic chair. I would always go for both options. The way we do it at the Academic Advising Service is that we obviously always inform prospective students about the different subjects and talk a bit about what they can do and where. And we might go into some of the key differences between subjects that are closely related. But if the question is a bit more detailed, say, “Can I do a module in bionics if I'm doing a degree in Mechanical Engineering?”, then we can help a little bit, but it's more advisable to go to the departments themselves. At Technische Universität, there are Course Guidance services run by students, but there will usually also be someone from the teaching team available to answer detailed questions about the subjects. I would always recommend trying both, and generally at universities you can get answers to both kinds of questions. So there are the general, orientation-related questions that we deal with at the Academic Advising Service:

What are my interests? What am I good at? Where is a good place to start? Do you have any advice on how to try this out? We talk a lot about these kinds of things at the Academic Advising Service, and then pass on the really detailed questions, especially organizational things, to Course Guidance. And most universities have both. So you just have to see what kind of question you have, and you can also try both avenues and get two opinions. That can be good. That's what I often recommend in the Academic Advising Service: Go and discuss your question with someone else as well; that way, you get two different perspectives on something that you want to clarify for yourself. You can find some middle ground between the two of them, add your own perspective into the mix, and work out the best solution for you.

00:24:36 "You can't talk to professors."

Ulrike:

The next myth is about professors. Professors are strict, they have no time for questions, they're not understanding, and they just do chalk-and-talk style teaching from the front of the lecture hall. And because there's only one professor in the lecture hall, it's loud and chaotic.

Arlett:

Definitely both yes and no on this one, too. I really like the way that was worded. Is that your wording or are those quotes from the responses from high school students?

Ulrike:

It's a kind of Frankenstein response. It's an amalgam of various different answers. Whenever the students talked about professors in their responses, it was relatively negative, as if professors are not very approachable, like a teacher. I got the impression that people thought professors were... I don't know if it's a question of respect or maybe even a bit of fear. Perhaps students think they will be super strict and that they aren't able to ask questions in lectures. You have to teach yourself everything because you can't ask the professor.

Arlett:

A divine apparition, almost untouchable. I think this is a good example of what I was saying earlier about half-truths. There really is a completely different culture at university. There are sometimes several hundred people in a lecture, and obviously that means that of the 523 people present, it is impossible for everyone to be able to ask a question if the lecture lasts one and a half hours. Usually things are arranged so that after the lecture you go to a tutorial. These have a lot fewer people in them, and everyone gets a chance to ask questions. But that doesn't mean that you can't talk to professors. After all, their role at the university is not only to do research but also to teach. They will have an office hour, or you

can just go up to them and say “hi” after the lecture if you want to discuss something briefly. So, of course, you talk to any of them. Obviously, because they teach in such a large lecture hall and have to cater to a lot of people, it can give the impression that they are a bit aloof, and so that’s where there is an element of truth. Perhaps someone who has gone to university is struck by how different it is, because in high school it obviously doesn’t go unnoticed if you’re not sitting in class in front of Mrs. Schulz or Mr. Müller at 8 o’clock in the morning. No one at university will notice that, and so, of course, that can give people the impression that professors are a bit unapproachable and there is a sense of anonymity. So, there is some truth in it because it’s just very different, especially when you’ve got used to high school as the normal way of doing things. But it is definitely not the case that they aren’t approachable and that they keep to themselves and never answer questions. That’s not true.

Ulrike:

They’re not the only ones that teach at university. In addition to the professors, there are also members of staff, lecturers, freelance staff who give seminars, and student assistants who run the tutorials after lectures. So it’s quite a broad picture. It’s good for listeners to know that professors are not the only teaching staff.

Arlett:

There’s this image people have of an auditorium with an unapproachable lecturer standing at the front, but that’s just one way of teaching from among a whole host of different ways of teaching that are combined. Of course, especially in the first semesters, when there are lots of courses focusing on basic principles, lectures are a big part of being at university, but that changes over the course of the degree. Perhaps it is also interesting to note that as you get closer and closer to a master’s degree, things keep changing, and generally the groups get smaller as you begin to specialize. So it’s much more about learning as part of a team, because you recognize the people, and in a small group, of course, lecturers are much more approachable than when there are several hundred of you.

Ulrike:

Some of them will even know your name if you haven’t completely tucked yourself away, because maybe you’ve given a presentation or spoken to someone about your bachelor’s or master’s thesis topic. So it’s quite good if you can make yourself seen a bit, and then you’ll maybe feel a bit less anonymous, which is a concern for some people, according to the survey responses.

00:29:12 “University is super anonymous vs. you meet a bunch of new people.”

Ulrike:

Speaking of anonymity: One of the things that came up was how things would be with other students. There were two camps. One was more pessimistic, they said, “Going to university is a really anonymous experience.” Even among themselves, the students don’t know each other at all.” The more positive answer can be summarized as: “You get to know a lot of people who all have the same interests, and you party with them, live in shared apartments, and start study projects.”

Arlett:

I think again the answer is that a mixture of the two is true. I’ll start with the parties, because we’re in our... traditionally, we organize the first day of the semester at Technische Universität, which always takes place in the winter semester. This is always a big thing. You can make contacts. Parties are part of university culture, and what it is really about is building connections with people, because a lot of people come from different cities and don’t have a circle of friends in Berlin. I think that is often the reason for parties at the beginning of the semester, when you are just starting your studies, and also obviously during the semester, where you need to build friendships. Many people move into shared apartments and houses. Again, a lot of people do that with the intention of meeting new people. They might be from another city and moving in with people is a good way of making new social contacts, perhaps with people who aren’t studying the same thing. It gives you a varied group of people around you, and you make connections so that you don’t feel lonely in a big city like Berlin, especially if you come from somewhere entirely different and have to start from scratch. I mentioned parties, and the other thing is, of course, the first day of semester when it all starts, and maybe you just moved to Berlin – or to the city you’re studying in – two weeks earlier, and so you don’t know anyone at first. There’s this lecture hall, at Technische Universität it’s the Audimax with 1,300 people – we mentioned that briefly earlier – which we open for the first day of the semester. We hold welcome talks in the Audimax, and so you sit there with 1,299 other people that you don’t know. That is the kind of thing that might happen. So that means that there’s truth in both the ideas that the high school students had. Hopefully, you start with the anonymity, and then everything gradually gets more and more friendly because you make connections. That’s quite an important aspect of the start of your studies. We often point out to people that it’s not going to work if you just buckle in and live with the anonymity. You really have to make sure that you make connections, and then that feeling of anonymity will dissipate for you to some extent. But you have to be proactive about it. This is really important, especially at the start of your studies. What I really like about the comments that you collected from the high school students is that many of them also wrote that they saw university as a great opportunity to build a new life for themselves. New people, new city, new field of study: You can really decide for yourself what you want and make a fresh start. I feel like there was a sense that people were really looking forward to university in a lot of the comments, and I

thought that was great. So don't be scared. These feelings of anonymity can come up, and we think it's important to always say that you can do something about it yourself.

Ulrike:

When I started, we quickly formed a Thursday group that always met at Café Hardenberg – which is across the street from the university. And we had a canteen group on Messenger, where people would post things like: “Hey, I’m here, is anyone else about?” and “Should we go to the canteen together?” Once you’ve found a few people that you’ve been in a few seminars with – or maybe you might even get something like this going at the welcome party and you can get on board with it – it’s a great way to be able to go and eat with others in a fairly casual arrangement, and maybe also get to know the university together. That’s how it worked for me in my last degree.

Arlett:

That’s a good point about the welcome parties. Particularly on first semester days, there are introductory events, which are usually organized by Course Guidance or the representative committees, which are always a great opportunity to make some initial connections. A lot of these events are explicitly about the social side of things. They aren’t just about explaining things like how you register for math tutorials and when you have to do it by, but also about going on a tour of the city and going downstairs to the student cafe. Just to ask you again, Ulli, how did it work for you? So, you had just arrived at university. How did you get involved in this Café Hardenberg group? How did you guys organize it?

Ulrike:

It was someone from the degree program, which was a really small cohort. I think there were about 30 or 40 of us. That made it easier, of course, and we all started in the same seminars in the first semester. As time passed, one person would be a semester ahead, another would have sat out a semester, and so there was a bit of a different mix. I went over the standard period of study, and at some point, the others had all finished, so there were always new people. Sometimes you had to do group projects, and you got to know people that way. At the end of the seminar, when it was lunch time, someone might ask the group, “Is anyone coming to the canteen?”. That person might even be you. And then someone might say, “Oh, I don’t have a MensaCard yet. Where do I get it from?” And then others might help them do that. To start with, everyone is in the same boat, and usually you don’t have a clue. Or sometimes one person has already done a bachelor’s and knows their way around. Hopefully, they’ll be nice enough to help you out a bit. So, just making eye contact and asking, “Is anyone else hungry?” is a great way to reach out to people.

Arlett:

Exactly. That speaks to what I was saying earlier about being able to do a lot of this yourself just by being proactive. Be ready to grab the situation by the scruff of the neck, and say to yourself, “If no one else asks if I want to go to the canteen, then maybe I’ll just be the one to ask the others.” That’s super important. Another myth or rumor occurs to me that is related to this. Particularly in the first few weeks of the semester, and especially in the winter semester, when the majority of students start at university, people tend to let this social element fall by the wayside. Maybe you have a study group or a set group of people that meets in the canteen twice a week. Maybe you have a workspace with a few study buddies or people that you meet regularly in the library, so that you build up your own little university family and you have a few points of contact in this big anonymous campus. In all the frenzy at the beginning where people are trying to do the work in all the courses in their schedules, they don’t really think about the social side. That usually leads – and I know this from the advisory sessions – that many people get to the end of the first or second semester and realize that they haven’t fully connected. We would really urge people not to forget this social aspect and make sure you build up a group like this for yourself, which you then have as a point of contact at the university, and also, as you just mentioned, to form study groups. Don’t let this fall by the wayside because you’re concerned about being kicked out of university or something. We hear the craziest things, like that people are afraid of being kicked out if they don’t have 30 credit points right at the end of the first semester – that it will be really dramatic and maybe a red light will come on in the examination office, and everyone who hasn’t passed is exmatriculated. That’s not the case. It’s important to know that, and our psychologists are always reminding people that less is more. It’s better to take one class less, so that you don’t lose sight of the need to build up a network, because it’s pretty difficult to get through your degree as a lone wolf.

Ulrike:

By “our psychologists” we mean our colleagues from Psychological Counseling who are also part of the Academic Advising Service. You can make an appointment with them if you really encounter problems that are bringing you down psychologically, such as loneliness or the feeling that everyone else is better or further ahead than you, or things like that. Something that really helped me when I talked to other students was that you noticed that they also had problems and that they might have a solution to a problem that I had. There were some who finished their master’s degree a bit after me. I was already over the standard period of study, and when I handed in my master’s thesis, there was someone still working on it who I was able to coach a bit and give advice to on how to get through it. In the end, they were able to complete it. So you can help each other, or say to someone, “I’m also finding it difficult. I didn’t understand what he said either.” You just need that kind of thing. It won’t work if you set yourself the goal of getting through it all on your own. That’s too hard.

Arlett:

Exactly. One issue that we see a lot at the Academic Advising Service – and it also came up a bit in the responses from high school students – is that many people associate university with stress and not having much free time. To that, I would say straight away that it doesn't have to be that way. So, on the one hand, if you started to feel stressed, you always have the option to back off a bit and organize things a bit differently. And going back to what you just said about Psychological Counseling: There is the Academic Advising Service, there's Psychological Counseling, and there are people in our team who can give advice on studying with an impairment or a disability or a chronic illness. And there are 25 billion other points of contact at the university as well. So the most important thing is that when you reach a point, like you just said, where you feel really lonely, you're struggling to cope or maybe you're so stressed that you don't even know where to begin: Come talk to us. I mean come to the Academic Advising Service. It might not always be exactly the right place to go for the advice you need, but it often happens that someone will come to us with a question or a concern, and we'll have a conversation to establish what the next step is for that person, what makes sense for them, and then we can point them in the direction of another contact point where they can get some support. But what is important, and again this has to do with what we discussed right at the beginning, is anonymity: With 35,000 students currently studying at Technische Universität, it doesn't really get noticed if someone on campus isn't doing well. You sit there with 100 other people in the lecture hall. If you don't go and talk to someone yourself and ask for help, then it will get a bit lost. So it's important to us that you come and see us in the Academic Advising Service. You can tell us what's going on and then we can see how to support you, and we can have a think with you about what the best thing to do is.

00:40:43 “An integrated degree (*Duales Studium*) is the best. Degrees from universities of applied sciences are dumb.”

Ulrike:

Onto the next myth: It's always better to do an integrated degree, because it's seen as higher quality by future employers that I'll be applying to.

Arlett:

I would go one further: Traditional academic universities are great, and universities of applied sciences are dumb. This is something that we talk about an awful lot. In recent years – for reasons that are not completely clear to me – there has been a lot of talk [in Germany] about integrated degrees, which generally combine vocational training with a more academic degree and are offered at universities of applied sciences. Increasingly, more traditional academic universities are also offering these kinds of degrees. I would always say – and the same thing applies to what I just said about traditional universities being great and universities of applied sciences being dumb – that you can't make such a sweeping statement. One is not better or worse than the other. There are just differences between these forms of degree. If you want to put it really generally and simply, you could say that

the traditional universities are more academic. In other words, the aim is to give you an academic education so that, at the end of your studies, you can develop and answer research questions, i.e. you have good analytical skills and can go into research yourself. At a university of applied sciences, you also get academic training, but the aim is more to prepare you for a job on the market, i.e. at a company or organization. One big difference is that all teaching staff at universities of applied sciences, whether they teach practical workshops or theory, have practical experience. That is not necessarily the case at a traditional, academic university. This is a major difference. With an integrated degree, you get a combination of these two things, and generally you end up with two qualifications, i.e. a vocational degree, and you can also apply the theoretical knowledge that you've gained at the universities. The question in the Academic Advising Service is really: What is the better fit for you? And you can try and answer that question by asking yourself what you intend to do with your degree, i.e. why you want to do it in the first place. What kind of person are you? Are you someone who learns much more easily when you can apply your learning? Or do you enjoy really abstract thinking – the kind that someone who isn't in the zone wouldn't understand at first glance? Do you enjoy it? Do you want to do it? What do you want to do with later on? It can be difficult to answer, but it usually helps to work out which form of degree suits you better. I don't think you can say that one thing is always better or worse than another thing. And I wouldn't say that you will definitely have a better chance of getting a job with one or the other – which is an argument that comes up a lot. Because at both kinds of university, you can get a job while you're still studying – in what's called a *Werkstudent* or "working student" position. This is where you provide support to a large company where you might want to work later on. It's not uncommon for these jobs to lead to final theses, where students write their theses in the companies themselves. That way, they build a relationship with an employer that is at least as strong or as promising as is suggested in the integrated degree programs.

Ulrike:

Sometimes, I think you are even obliged to stay on after an integrated degree program, because the company has invested in you financially. In other words, they develop their own junior staff.

Arlett:

True – that's an important point. Sometimes at the start of an integrated degree, you have to enter a contract with the company or institution that is responsible for the vocational training – whether it's a public authority or a private sector firm. You have to think about that. Some people want to commit themselves contractually because they want the security. They say, "I'm planning on doing this anyway. I've been thinking about working for this company since I was six." I've genuinely had advisory sessions where it made total sense to enter the contract because – at least from what you can judge at the end of a session like

that – it looked like a really good fit. Then there are other conversations I’ve had with students where we came to the conclusion that it wouldn’t give them enough flexibility. They won’t be able to do a lot of things that they might want to because they’ll be doing this integrated degree program. It means that they have to switch back and forth between the vocational training element at the company and the academic element at the university – which they have to get through – and to be honest, that doesn’t leave much room for anything else. It’s a sizable workload. At least, that’s what we hear from the students who come to us for advice.

Ulrike:

So much for partying...

Arlett:

Exactly. There isn’t a lot of time left for parties. You have to think about it carefully, and to underline what I said earlier: It has to be the right fit for the person. Nothing is better or worse than anything else across the board. Plus, if you can, try and get in touch with people who can tell you what it feels like in reality, and then make the decision.

00:46:01 “You can’t find a job with a bachelor’s degree.”

Ulrike:

Going to back to what kinds of qualifications future employers value, I can still remember when I started out at university that there was this myth that bachelor’s degrees weren’t accepted. If you had a bachelor’s and applied somewhere [in Germany], they would always take the candidate with a *Diplom*, because nobody knew what a bachelor’s was. It wouldn’t get you a job. That was a myth that I had to contend with back then. Can you remember that, too? Has that been dispelled or do some people still worry about what they can do a bachelor’s degree and whether there’ll have opportunities?

Arlett:

This is going to be another slightly longer answer. It’s an issue that comes up in the advising service. I would say that although the switch [in Germany and other countries in Europe] from single-tier *Diplom* or *Magister* degrees to these two-tier bachelor’s/master’s degrees took place quite a long time ago – so that really all degree programs have completely made the transition at this point – I get the impression that the vast majority of people are still deciding to go that extra step and do a master’s degree, based on job ads and from what I hear from people who are job hunting. In countries like the USA and the UK – where these types of degree actually come from – it’s more the case that after your bachelor’s degree, which is officially the first university degree that qualifies you for a profession, you actually get a job with it. People who are really thinking about academia and maybe doing a doctoral thesis and working at a university will do a master’s. In Germany, it’s still the case that

employers have that view of bachelor's degrees – at least, I would confirm that on the basis of what we hear in our advisory sessions. After all, a bachelor's degree really does entail fewer years of university study than a *Diplom*. So you've just done less studying in terms of time. That doesn't necessarily mean that you can't do as much, but it can mean that you haven't done certain things, such as a larger project of your own. Your final thesis, for instance, will be smaller and slightly more streamlined if you've "only" done a bachelor's. So I'd say that, for the moment, it is still the case that the vast majority of students complete both kinds of degree, and so they already consider what master's they might do when choosing their degree. That said, when I talk to students, I often advise them to concentrate on their choice of bachelor's degree to start with. Because generally when you factor in the master's as well, it tends to complicate things. Plus, I think over the next five to ten years it will become more and more common to get a bachelor's, then work for a year or two, and then maybe do a master's degree part-time while continuing to work. Companies might provide more support. I think we're going to see a bit of a shift in this regard over the next few years.

Ulrike:

More generally, do high school students who are now applying to study know what bachelor's and master's are or is that sometimes the first question they ask when they come for advice?

Arlett:

Most of them have at least heard the terms, I think – maybe off the TV, Ulli? Most people don't quite realize how flexible it is. So what I was just saying applies, i.e. you are basically free to say: "Yes, I might do a bachelor's and a master's; I already know that. But they are really two separate degrees." So you finish the bachelor's, get your qualification and then decide whether to do another year abroad, or maybe squeeze in an internship because you've realized that there are about three paths that you could take in computer engineering or mechanical engineering or in philosophy. You can imagine taking any of the three routes, and they all interest you, so you'd like to try some stuff out first before you make a decision on a master's and a specialization. That's totally doable. Of course, it's time-consuming from an organizational point of view, because you have to put together a plan. You might have to look into what internship opportunities are out there, and you might have to ask yourself where your income is going to come from. But basically, you're free to do that, and I have the feeling that most people aren't completely aware of that, i.e. that you can and maybe should make a separate decision on your master's further down the line, especially if you don't yet have a very clear idea of what you want to do. You can leave it open because there'll be another opportunity to try things out. It's perhaps important to mention that.

00:50:38 “In my degree, I only deal with things that interest me.”

Ulrike:

Next, we have another myth related to what content you cover as part of your degree. In your degree, you basically only have to work on subjects that interest you.

Arlett:

To put a figure on it, I would say that is about 75% accurate, assuming you have chosen a degree based on your interests. And that touches on another issue that often comes up at the Academic Advising Service – and we may come back to this later: the motivation for doing a particular degree could have to do with career goals and earning money, etc. So, if you’ve made the decision based on your interests and really asked yourself: What am I good at? What would I like to be able to do better? What interests me? Do I want to go into research or am I more interested in applying things in practice? Then you can specifically choose subjects based on that. You probably still end up having two or three subjects that you don’t... For instance, I can remember my Danish grammar lectures on Thursday mornings weren’t the most exciting thing in my program for me. But I had to sit through them to get the degree. So it will still be a bit like that, and you’ll have to take one or two things simply because they are in the schedule. And it’s maybe a good thing that right at the beginning, when you’re learning the basics, that you take the odd lecture where you don’t arrive full of the joys of spring, on time, and raring to go on a Friday morning after your first party of the week on a Thursday night.

Ulrike:

Earlier in the episode we already touched on the fact that you have compulsory modules and elective modules, where you get to try things out. So I think we’ve already got a pretty good idea of how things look in reality.

00:52:20 “At university, everyone has laptops, and you work in a much more digital way.”

Ulrike:

One myth I found very interesting was: At university, everyone has laptops or tablets, and you work much more digitally than at high school.

Arlett:

Yes, that probably depends on the school. Lots of high schools [in Germany] are still in the digital stone age. When we give talks at schools or attend career and university information days, we often notice that there is a general ban on cell phones. We generally give talks using projectors, which works fine, but it’s not yet the case that we can use smart boards, or that the teachers prepare digital lessons. But the big question is how much the pandemic has contributed to a change on this front. Perhaps in two years or so, high school students

visiting universities will find that the environment is quite familiar to them, because their school has become more digital. But basically, I think it has to do with size. There are platforms where things are shared, such as, of course, online classes. So, someone will do a live stream on a particular platform, or they'll record a class and make it available there. The fact that generally a large number of people have to be reached means that much more content is made available digitally. It's a much easier way of distributing things; some people might be abroad for a while because perhaps they weren't born and didn't grow up in Germany. Things just have to be made available online. So this is clearly an important part of everyday life at university.

Ulrike:

I'm also very intrigued to see how it will... Obviously, for us at least, this summer semester is taking place completely online. But we've already seen that you can't do some things online, like labs, workshops, and practical exercises. So let's see how things turn out in the winter semester and what is held onto from this big leap online that we've only really just taken even at university – suddenly, everyone is working from home, and teaching has had to go online. So that's still a bit up in the air. I'm just wondering: do you think it is still possible to do a degree without a laptop? I remember there was a *Magister* student in my master's program who still wrote his term papers on a typewriter at home. But I think you need some kind of device that you can use to get on the Internet and check your university emails and register for exams. It would be pretty inconvenient to have to go to the library every time you need to use a computer, wouldn't it?

Arlett:

Yes, I think that would be difficult, if not impossible. This makes me think of the differences between countries. We talked earlier about the fact that I studied in Denmark, where the whole system and the country worked completely differently. A huge amount of money was invested in education, and the university structures were much more lavishly equipped, and so it was actually possible not to have a computer there. I lived in a student apartment share, and everything was kind of chaotic with lots of parties. So it wasn't very conducive to writing your thesis, for instance. But there were loads of workspaces at the university, where we could go at any time, and there was so much there that you could use. A lot of the students would go there. I did my thesis with a co-author. That made it even more difficult to work from home, because you would need to exchange ideas about certain things. So we would just meet at university and do the thesis there. We really wrote everything at the university in workspaces – not in the library. Working in the library is something that I came across in Germany. Bigger universities have bigger libraries. You're able to rent carrels (individual workspaces) if you are writing a thesis. But you can't get around the fact that a lot takes place online. You need some kind of device in order to take part in university life, because a lot of things such as communication and reminders like, for instance, "Don't

forget to pay your semester fee” are sent via email. The application process at Technische Universität is now exclusively online, and there’s always a first step where you have to input your data. If you apply with a German *Abitur*, the whole first step of the application is on the “hochschulstart” platform. So you have to have the right equipment to be able to access that.

00:57:16 “A university degree completely prepares you for your dream job.”

Ulrike:

Onto the next myth: Your degree program is designed to help you get the dream job that you had in mind when you chose the degree. You need to have planned out the rest of your life before choosing your degree; you need to know exactly what you want out of life and have already done internships in relevant fields. During your degree, you’re taught the skills you need for this profession. People who choose their degrees based on what interests them will not make enough money to live on.

Arlett:

All the things you just said can be a great help: If you’re clear about what you want to do for work later on, if you’re aware of what you’re good at, and if you know what your interests are and what you want to build on. That can all help you to choose your degree in a structured way. That’s awesome. In practice, however, I have to say right away that, in the majority of cases, it doesn’t work so straightforwardly. First up: It’s great to have a dream job. But the fact is that if we think ten years into the future – and that can easily be the amount of time that passes between choosing your degree and starting work – the jobs that are out there might look very different. The world may have changed completely. You might have to react to something like the coronavirus pandemic, for instance. There are some things that you can’t 100% predict, and that’s why I would always say that these things are really good guides. It’s good to know a bit about certain areas: for instance, having an understanding of what your dream job is really like. So, perhaps you want to be a doctor: does that come from a TV series, or have you done some work experience? Do you know what it involves? Do you know what the different options are with a degree in medicine? It always helps a lot to have some really good background knowledge, and those are all good ideas when making your decision about what degree to do. I would advise against getting attached to the idea that everything will work out as planned. This is something that comes up a lot when we talk to students, which is why we are thinking of doing a future podcast from the Academic Advising Service about this topic, i.e. choosing your degree and the fact that you can’t fully know how things will turn out over the next ten years. What happens to a lot of people is they are happy with the choice they make and then, say, they meet a professor working in an area like low-power electronics. The student hasn’t heard of this before; they find it super interesting, and all of a sudden – bam – they’re looking into a completely different specialism and thinking about changing subjects. Or, for instance,

auditing is replaced as a profession by a new kind of job, and things are completely reorganized because of a political change or something. So there are just things that change. Everything is always in a state of flux, and that's why it's a good idea to keep your eye on the ball and be prepared for things not to turn out exactly the way you thought they would.

Ulrike:

To touch on an aspect that was also in there about how your degree teaches you the skills you need for your job: I think that's actually where things like the Career Service at Technische Universität Berlin come in. It offers training and other services, and it's up to you to piece it all together. For instance, I didn't do Excel for Professionals as part of my degree, but I currently need it to do a lot of my tasks.

Arlett:

I think there was one response from a high school student that went into a lot of detail on this. They talked about things like presentation skills. I think if you go into a degree program thinking that the curriculum will cover those things, you're going to be a little disappointed – at least in the vast majority of degree programs at university. These kinds of skills are not the main priority. Degree programs are really about imparting expert knowledge and, as you just rightly pointed out, there are a lot of other teams and services at the university that deal with professional skills. But I do remember that I integrated something along those lines into one of my subjects; it was called something like “professional orientation.” But that had to do with the fact that I had such a wide-ranging degree – this was at the University of Magdeburg. I had so many credits in different faculties and could have gone in a lot of different directions. So it was a little confusing because you didn't really know where to start. So that was the idea behind this professional orientation thing. But as a rule, I'd say that this is really covered by separate trainings offered by the Career Service – that's what it's called at Technische Universität, but it can have different names. If you want to learn these kinds of skills, you have to arrange to do one of these trainings yourself. Sometimes you can do it as part of an elective, but sometimes you can't. It also depends to some extent on the subject you're doing. So on this myth I would say: Not true; however, it is true that you can learn these skills at university in some form if you want to, but you have to organize it yourself.

Ulrike:

And sometimes, I think you can include it in your degree. If it's not part of your degree, sometimes there's a block seminar called “Intercultural Communication,” and you can include that if it fits with your degree program. But that's probably completely different at each university, and so you have to keep your ear to the ground and see what's put on the notice boards or sent out via email. You should definitely regularly check your university emails.

Arlett:

Exactly. That's a good piece of advice: Keep an eye on your emails, especially when things get going at the start of the semester. And to underscore what you just said: There are definitely programs where this applies, and you really just have to look at the specific university and subject, and maybe get in touch to ask if that kind of thing is possible. But there are cases where that exists, and you can usually find it in the study and examination regulations of the subject in question. But this is also a great question for Course Guidance or for the Academic Advising Service, if you're really interested in this. You can ask where it's possible, in what circumstances it's possible, whether you can include it in your degree, or whether it would be a kind of hobby on the side. This can definitely be something you factor into your decision as to what degree you want to do. So, for instance, you might be pretty clear on the subject you want to study, but you might also want to go a university where, even if these kinds of skills aren't part of the curriculum for that subject, they at least give you the option to do a course on them. So, for instance, there might be a university that has a good degree program, but it doesn't let you do these kinds of courses, and, in that case, you can just opt for a university that does. Basically, this is an important thing to research and ask about when choosing your degree.

01:04:38 “Your future salary is what motivates you for your entire degree.”

Ulrike:

The last aspect of the myth was that you should take into account what you'll earn further down the line. And you won't earn enough if you decide based on what you're interested in.

Arlett:

That's a difficult question. I've filed this one in my head under “Myth A,” which is related: “If I do a degree in business, then I'll make a ton of money later on.” And also: “Job and salary prospects are key considerations when choosing your degree.” I have to say I actually think this is a bit of side issue. I mean, of course money is an important consideration, and it's a motivation for quite a few people who might say, “I want to do get a qualification that will get me a job which is a bit better paid than, say, working behind the counter in a bakery.” But it can't be your only motivation. If it is, I can almost guarantee that it will go awry. You have to be interested in it, and I think it's fair to say that if you have a degree, you won't have a serious problem on the job market – which doesn't mean that don't need to make an effort. Over the course of their degree, every student has to make sure that they find out a bit about what they can do in their field of studies. Generally speaking – at least this is our experience, and our colleagues at the Career Service would probably confirm this – you can do a lot more with a degree than you probably think. So you pretty much have to take care of this. Whether or not you'll land a job with an 80,000-euro annual salary straight after

university is pretty hard to predict. But it's not a good reason for starting a degree if it's your only motivation.

Ulrike:

At least not one that will see you through your entire degree. That's a long time.

Arlett:

Exactly. It's often a bit disappointing in our advisory sessions when you say, "OK, but that can't be your motivation." You get people saying, "But business is great – I can do something in marketing or media." And then sometimes I'll ask, "So have you had any contact with the business world, or how exactly do you imagine it?", and the answer you get is a bit thin. That kind of thing can happen, and you can understand where that comes from. But it becomes clear that you just have to be interested in the subject. You're not going to get through a degree if you're doing it because you've heard people say that they've made a lot of money with that degree. That doesn't make you interested in it. A degree isn't something you get done in six months. You have to be able to stay motivated over several years and get yourself through it. It involves a lot of personal responsibility. There is no one standing behind you, making you do it. It's down to you, and it becomes really difficult if you're not really up for it.

01:08:05 "You can choose your degree based on your performance in your subjects at high school."

Ulrike:

Next, we have another myth related to choosing your degree: You can choose your degree program based on the subjects in which you got good grades in high school. Take out the subjects where your grades weren't very good, and then do a degree in a combination of your best subjects. You have to study something that you're good at.

Arlett:

As I said earlier, this is a good starting point. It's often where we start from in an advisory session: We'll ask, "What were your main subjects at high school? What was your final grade in your *Abitur*?" Did you have a hard time with it? Was it fun? Why did you choose it?" The vast majority of students chose their main two *Abitur* subjects – if they had them – and their general subjects based on their interests, and then they eliminate the rest. But there are also people that say things like, "I took English and politics because I was good at them, and I thought they would help me get a good *Abitur* grade. They would help me get into quite a few different courses at university. But they're not what I'm mainly interested in." Good grades are not always a good thing to base your decision on, because high school and university are different. We've already pointed out a number of areas where this is the case. You need to have a different kind of motivation and drive to keep you going. Good grades don't necessarily tell you that those are the right subjects. So it's worth questioning that. It

can often be a good starting point. Of course, teachers will often say, “Hey, you got really good grades in chemistry. Think about it, even if you haven’t considered it yourself. Just find out about it.” That can be a really good launch pad, and help you dive into the process of choosing your degree. But it doesn’t necessarily have to come down to that in the end.

Ulrike:

It often doesn’t translate one-to-one. So just because art was one of your main *Abitur* subjects, you don’t necessarily have to study art at university. I think our vice president, who trained as a computer scientist, once said in a welcoming speech something like: “Creative minds could become creative problem solvers in computer science.” But that avenue probably wouldn’t occur to you occur to you as a creative person if you were trying to decide what to do. Obviously, you have to have to a bit of an interest in computers, programming and problem solving. But you wouldn’t come up with that potential path through a process of elimination. It’s more the kind of thing that would come up in a conversation with someone like you, who can piece things together and knows all the subjects. There are subjects you can do at university, such as robotics and e-commerce, that don’t even exist at high school. So you wouldn’t think to do a degree in them if you were just working on the basis of what you did at school.

Arlett:

That’s exactly what I think. If you take my main subjects at *Abitur* – math and English – you can’t immediately think of a good university subject that combines both. I had good grades in both. So I wouldn’t have been able to come up with something to do a university just by looking at my high school qualifications. The idea that I would eventually end up combining these things with science or technical subjects or even cultural studies was just not part of the conversation. It just wasn’t on the cards. The other thing is that certain subjects aren’t offered at high school – things that I might have wanted to do as a main subject. You couldn’t do computer science as a main subject, and you couldn’t do music at an advanced level because it was only offered as a general subject. Things are just dealt with very differently. Another thing is exactly what you said: Maybe there are 25 other options that I don’t know about, and that’s exactly why it’s really worth taking advantage of all the services that the universities are offering, whether it’s an academic advising service, or, for instance, all universities are now developing orientation talks that are generally given at fairs. Make use of these in order to get an idea of what you can do with the two or three ideas and interests that you have at the moment. Nobody is aware of absolutely everything that’s available, so it helps to ask a few people.

01:12:48 “Stereotypes about different degree subjects are true.”

Arlett:

Uli, I'd like to follow that with another myth about degree stereotypes. We sometimes get this in the Academic Advising Service. Someone comes along – let's stick with this business degree example that we were describing. They say they can earn a lot of money with the degree, and maybe they did it as one of their main subjects at *Abitur*. Sometimes we have people who have done politics and business together, or business and math. But then they say, "In business, they're all con artists. I can't be bothered with it. It's all about maximizing profit, and the people are so mean." Then there are the typical computer scientist stereotypes: none of them get enough sunlight; they all code all day, eat pizza and drink Coke, don't really do anything, and have no social life. A lot of subjects are associated with very entertaining clichés to the extent that people sometimes take them so seriously that it doesn't even occur to them to think: "Maybe I could do programming, because it's fun, it totally fits in with my interests, it's related to logic and abstract thinking, and I was quite good at it in school where I did a general course in it." People completely rule a subject out for themselves because they have these over-the-top clichés in their heads, which, of course, aren't entirely made up, it has to be said. But, as you say, it's always worth taking a look at what the subject has to offer, perhaps in programming courses, at Girls' Day, in *Schülerlaboren* (labs for high school students). You'll see relatively quickly if you go to one of those talks that, while some of the clichés will be confirmed, there'll be others that won't be true. So it's worth having a look – if it's possible and you aren't prevented from doing so because of COVID.

Ulrike:

Then you can see for yourself whether the culture of the subject, which you'll have a more realistic idea of, actually suits you.

Arlett:

Exactly. Maybe you'll like it: pasty, black clothes, pizza, Coke... It might not be such a bad thing for some people.

Ulrike:

The dream.

Arlett:

Exactly. Maybe you decide to do it for five years in the hope that everything will have changed by then. No, I'm just kidding. I think it's worth having your preconceptions challenged – especially in Berlin, which is such a diverse place to study. I just think about how active the "Freitagsrunde" (Friday club) at Technische Universität Berlin is. It's the representative committee in the Faculty of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science. They have a mentoring program, which lots of other faculties also have. But there are so many things there that don't fit at all with the cliché of sitting in darkened rooms and eating

bad food. So it's worth seeing how things really are and maybe even disproving some of the clichés.

01:15:52 The oldest myths: Restricted admissions and waiting time

Ulrike:

The next myth probably comes up really regularly for you; it might even be the most common. It's all about restricted admissions policy. One response from a high school student even said, "You can forget about doing a degree with restricted admission right away. They're just not attainable goal for mere mortals. You have to research the grade required before doing the degree and be able to show that you have the necessary grade point average in order to get in the program.

Arlett:

I don't think that's true. It's clear where it comes from. Some programs, such as medicine, do require quite high grades from their applicants, and these will be unattainable for some people. So the kinds of programs that aren't easy to get into do exist. But I'd say it's pretty rare that it's completely impossible. On the one hand, if you think about it, restricting admissions (known as *Numerus clausus*, or NC, in German) really just has to do with the fact that in certain subjects at a certain university, you expect to receive more applications than you can admit. At Technische Universität, classic examples would be things like Architecture and Industrial Engineering, i.e. subjects where we know we get a lot of applications, and a lot of interest, but where really can't take them all by a long way. So admissions for those programs are restricted. When you apply for a program like that, you will usually need a good grade. But it is important to know that the grade is really only half the story. In addition to the *Abitur* grade, things like waiting times also play a role in the selection process for places in programs with restricted admission. There are a lot of different definitions floating around, but waiting time is time that passes between obtaining your *Abitur* and applying for a university degree program, discounting any time spent enrolled at a university. To give a brief example: A student does their *Abitur* in the summer of 2020. They are interested in the natural world, but still unsure of what they want to do. They think, "Agriculture sounds good, I'll start studying that". They are enrolled for two semesters, but then they realize that it involves a bit too much biology, chemistry and plant sciences. I'd prefer it if there were a bit more math. Maybe I'll take a break and do a Voluntary Ecological Year (*freiwilliges ökologisches Jahr*) in an organization that works on nature. I'll see what that kind of work really involves and what battles are being fought. After a year of volunteering, they realize that they could really see themselves studying Agricultural Engineering. It combines a bit of math and physics with agriculture. So, they apply for the winter semester of 2022. That means two years have passed between their *Abitur* and applying for the degree, and one year of that was spent in a volunteer project and not enrolled at a university. So you take into account that year, working on the basis of semesters. In other words, as one year

consists of two semesters, this student would be able to claim two semesters of waiting time. Another myth around waiting times is that it starts from when you first apply somewhere. You aren't put on some dubious list the first time you apply, and your waiting time starts accumulating from then, and when you apply somewhere new, they look at that list. None of that is true. Basically, the waiting time is calculated on the basis of people's resumes. The university just looks at how much time an applicant has spent enrolled at a university and how much time they have not been enrolled, and the waiting time is just calculated straightforwardly on that basis. It's important to know that the waiting time can carry more or less weight depending on the degree program and depending on the university. At Technische Universität, *Abitur* grades and waiting times are equally weighted in the selection process. At another university, it might be the case that, say, the grade counts for 60 percent, 20 percent is the waiting time, and 20 percent is maybe accounted for by internships related to the degree subject. So, the university looks at people's resumes and assigns points accordingly. Applicants then have a kind of points score, and that is what is considered in the selection process. At Technische Universität, we basically just work with different selection "pots" as it were, with various priorities for the selection process. But it varies a lot, and it's really worth paying a visit to the Academic Advising Service or Admissions Service of the university that you're applying to. That way, you can get a good idea of how the selection process works at that specific university. A related rumor on this topic is that the waiting time and the grades you need for admission are somehow set in advance. That's not true. The selection processes are simply begun and then are completed at some point. So, it's only when you have filled all the places in a program that you're able to tell what grade or waiting time – or maybe what internship – a student needed in order to get on the program. On their websites, universities do publish their "cut-off criteria" ("*Auswahlgrenzen*") – that's what these cut-off grades and waiting times are called at Technische Universität; different universities use different terms, such as "restricted admissions/NC values" ("*NC-Werte*"). But these cut-off criteria are the figures from previous years. They are published on the website to give applicants a rough idea of what they can expect in terms of selection criteria. Universities don't set these criteria in advance. They don't say: "To get in the Architecture program, you need a grade point average of 1.8," or "For Mechanical Engineering, you'll get in if you have one semester of waiting time." The cut-off criteria aren't predetermined but are the result of each selection process. That means that if you can see from a university's website that you wouldn't have gotten into a program over the last few years, or that you wouldn't have had a very good chance, that doesn't necessarily mean that you won't get into it next year. So make sure you ask for advice. Often it is possible to tweak the admissions criteria a bit, such as accumulating waiting time. It's good to know about that when making your choices. Get some advice, and don't be put off if someone says, "You can forget it; you don't stand a chance anyway." It's often the case that you might be able to study in another city because there aren't so many applicants. Subjects that are in high demand in Berlin might be offered at other universities

in other cities without restricted admissions because the applicant pool is not as enormous as it is in Berlin or Hamburg or Munich. How admissions works is one of the most common topics that we discuss in our advisory sessions. Things often dawn on people, and it's not uncommon for us to hear: "I'd already ruled out three things from the word go, because after seeing the cut-off criteria I thought I didn't stand a chance." Then we might end up talking about how they still might get in. We talk more about alternative routes to getting into the program and less about alternative courses of study. It would be such an incredible shame if someone threw their plans out the window, or has already done so, because they aren't familiar with the admissions process. So I would really urge people to drop by and ask us how it really works, so that they have an idea of what their chances are of getting on particular programs.

Ulrike:

You think you've got your head round it for one university, and then you have to know that it is completely different at different universities – some might need a cover letter, or some kind of pre-university internship. You also need to understand that it you have to find out how it works at each university, and that you can't just apply how things are at one university to all others.

Arlett:

Exactly. You need someone to have told you that. I have another thing about waiting times that often comes up in our advisory sessions – i.e. this period of time between your *Abitur* and your application for a university degree which you accumulate, and which automatically counts as a criterion in the selection process. People often think that this waiting time is somehow converted into an improved grade point average. For instance, for each semester of waiting time that you've accumulated, your *Abitur* grade goes up by, say, 0.1. That's just nonsense. What happens is that universities look at these criteria, but it's not the case that they start to cancel each other out or anything. That's a really persistent rumor. There's another rumor that I'd like to bring up: What happens really often is that people apply to a restricted admission program but don't get into it. So they just enroll themselves in any program without restricted admission, thinking that this will give them some kind of home advantage at Technische Universität Berlin, and they think that after one semester, they'll be able to just switch over to the subject they originally wanted to get into. A classic example that comes up in my advisory work is Industrial Engineering and Management. It's a popular program that people sometimes don't get into, so they enroll in Electrical Engineering in the hope that they can switch across later on. But it obviously doesn't work like that. So there's this rumor that goes round that you have some kind of home advantage once you've gotten into Technische Universität. Then you can apply again, and you don't have to go through the selection process or something. That's nonsense. If you want to apply for a restricted

admission subject, you have to apply just like everyone else, even if you're already at the university.

Ulrike:

And then you won't have accumulated a semester of waiting time because you were enrolled at university, right?

Arlett:

Exactly. That's what makes this such an issue. We then have to have a conversation about how their plan won't work out. This is one of the more problematic effects of myths and rumors: People make some strange decision which actually ends up putting a stumbling block in their way. If you are enrolled in a university degree program, that time does not count toward your waiting time, but if, instead, you accumulate more waiting time, that will come in handy if you apply for the restricted admission program again. Of course, it's a bummer if you only realize this after two years. It's annoying and disappointing to find out that you could have arranged things in a way that would have been more advantageous to you. But if you don't know, you don't know. And you can't just undo it. But that's why I would really urge people to have this selection process explained to them. The best way to do that is to talk to the university that they are applying to. Or talk to the Course Guidance or the Office of Student Affairs – basically the people who are familiar with the selection processes at that university. Go in person if you are able to or, if not, give them a call. Just make sure you understand the process. That way, you won't rule out a degree program that you could feasibly get into, i.e. maybe there's a different route you can take where you end up in the program even though you'd thought you didn't stand a chance. And, conversely, that way you won't decide to study something else because you think that it gives you a home advantage and in two years you'll be in the Industrial Engineering and Management program. But you end up disappointed, because you acted on the basis of false information. That would be a really shitty situation, to put it bluntly.

01:28:31 “You can start with vocational training after your *Abitur* and always drop out of a degree program.”

Ulrike:

The last myth I have for you is this: You can do vocational training to begin with. You are never too old to do an academic degree and can always do one further down the line. If you start a degree, you can always drop out of it. That's not a big deal.

Arlett:

Definitely. I would confirm all three of those things. I think it's great if you're faced with this choice as to what to study at university and you say, “I'm not really sure. I've done my *Abitur*. But that doesn't necessarily have to lead directly into a degree.” I think it's important

– and this comes up a lot in the Academic Advising Service – that students should be able to say why they want to do a degree. And if you’re not 100% sure, that could be a reason for starting with an apprenticeship first. It’s then pretty common then for people to say, “OK, I did the vocational training and I noticed that I would often ask the teachers why things worked a certain way.” And then students realize that they want to learn more. In that case, they can go straight into doing a more academic degree in the subject. So, you really do have a lot of freedom and flexibility in making your decision, and it’s better to take a detour in order to be able to make a more informed decision than to do everything in a hurry and then realize later on that something wasn’t for you. But even that can be one way of doing things. We had one response from the survey of high school students where the person was really relieved to realize that you can actually just drop out of a degree program. If you realize after starting that you don’t like it, you can switch programs or drop out. So, yes, I would agree. It is relatively rare that people make a straightforward decision, and then always think it was a great decision and are always super motivated and happy, and complete everything exactly how they had planned five years earlier. That’s pretty unusual, because it’s a time when you get a lot of information and encounter a lot of new things along the way. You might make a different decision after two years. The only thing that I sometimes find a bit complicated is when people who depend on German Government funding decide to change their degree. [This funding is known as *BAföG*, which stands for “Federal Training Assistance Act”.] With *BAföG*, it’s relatively easy to switch programs within the first three semesters. According to the *BAföG* law, the fact that you can change your course of study must be included in the guidance about the degree. But if you change your mind in the sixth semester, for instance, things get complicated, especially if you’re not prepared for the fact you’ll no longer receive *BAföG*. That’s why it’s always a good idea to go back to the Academic Advising Service or the *BAföG* Service and get someone to explain exactly how it works. There are always solutions. A lot of people work part-time in order to finance a degree. You can even make this part of your professional development by working at the university itself or by looking for a position as a *Werkstudent* (working student) in a company. But if you are so taken by surprise that you suddenly have no more money, or that you can’t rely on regular payments all of sudden, then that is obviously a problem. But that aside, I think basically leaving things open is a great idea.

Ulrike:

And if you’re in any doubt, the best thing to do is to speak to the Academic Advising Service upfront.

Arlett:

Yes, and not to assume things. So, don’t think: “I did an *Abitur*, so I have to go to university.” “I should go because my parents want me to.” “If I want to earn money, I need to a degree.” There is some truth in those things, but...

Ulrike:

“I’ve started it now, so I have to finish it.”

Arlett:

Exactly. That’s not a good way to go about it. That’s what our experience shows.

Ulrike:

That’s all of them. That’s all 80 responses covered. Or, rather, 80 responses to two questions makes 160. Thank you very much once again for sending them in, and hopefully we’ve been able to give some good answers to where you’re currently at. Arlett, in your advisory sessions, there must be things that only really come to light once you get talking, i.e. myths and rumors that aren’t really even on people’s radars, and they only find out about them in the course of the conversation. I’m thinking of things that people might not have even questioned whether they’re true or not, so they wouldn’t have thought to mention them in their responses to this survey. Is there anything else that you’re itching to share?

01:32:57 “Your knowledge of the degree subject should already be at the level of someone who has taken it as a main subject in their *Abitur*.”

Arlett:

Something important that occurs to me has to do with the level of knowledge that people need to have when they start a degree. So someone who has maybe never really had much to do with universities or degrees might think: “It’s not for me because you have to have taken certain main subjects at *Abitur*. Like, if I want to study electrical engineering or something, I need to have done math and physics.” So they might think you have to meet really specific criteria, like certain main subjects, or experience in certain areas, or have done three internships, in order to even get into a study program. That’s nonsense. It often comes down to completely different things in your degree, such as – like we mentioned earlier when we were talking about anonymity – big study groups, being able to organize yourself to a large extent, really wanting to do a subject and staying motivated in order to see it through, being able to think logically, and also being able to express yourself. When it comes to presenting my own research findings for the first time or setting up a group project and having to basically project manage my way through a semester, then I need a lot of other skills, and things like main *Abitur* subjects and internships are completely irrelevant to succeeding at university. That’s often something that comes out in conversations with people who come to the Academic Advising Service. In trying to make their decision, they frequently focus more on the content of the degree and on the things you need to know. So we often talk about what you actually need to survive at university, and that is often not subject expertise at all. That’s not what gets you through the first semesters.

01:34:46 “It’s not possible to do a degree if you have an impairment or a disability.”

Arlett:

Another myth also comes from our experience at the Academic Advising Service, where we have people – including some who are already at university – that have a disability or some form of impairment, and they completely rule out a degree because they think that they won’t be able to participate in certain things. I would really recommend that people get advice on this. So we advise high school students to come and see us if they have any kind of impairment, be it physical or mental, or maybe they get ill every now and then; perhaps they had their impairment at high school. Drop by, and get some advice. There are specialized members of staff in our team who know about studying with an impairment. You’re able to apply for things like study aids and even an assistant who can help with day-to-day things, for example, using pipettes in the lab or taking notes in lectures. There’s also technical support available if you have a hearing impairment – that kind of thing. So, it’s possible to go to university if you have an impairment, and it must be made possible. Everyone should have the same opportunities. The Academic Advising Service is a good point of contact if you have an impairment and have any doubts – and that explicitly includes psychological impairments. If you have depression and have periods of a few months when you’re unable to do everything you normally can, there are solutions available. To find out more, please come see us or contact us at the Academic Advising Service.

01:36:38 “How do I tell if something is a myth or a rumor?”

Ulrike:

Do you have any advice on how people can tell if someone is passing on a myth or a rumor? For instance, maybe someone they know says to them, “You have dyslexia, so I don’t think a more academic university is for you.” Here is the prospectus for the university of applied sciences.” Do you have any advice on how to get into this mindset of questioning the information you’re presented with and asking if it’s true or whether you need to look into it more?

Arlett:

I would always assume that if a person has just blurted out some information, it’s always a good idea to get a second opinion. I think everyone has experienced that kind of thing in their everyday life. Let’s say you’re buying a new monitor. You don’t just ask one person; you ask maybe five, and then you think: “OK, that person is really into gaming, so they need a completely different kind of monitor to me.” There are often lots of different opinions on all kinds of topics, and if you’ve only heard one opinion from one person, I think it’s a good general rule to get a second opinion. Obviously, if you hear the same thing 20 times, it’s a bit difficult to question it. But if you still have this little voice in you saying, “but I want to do this anyway,” then definitely go and get some support and advice. You need to find someone who is going to be encouraging, and so it’s always good to ask people with the right

expertise. You can come by the Academic Advising Service and just empty out all your doubts and concerns, and we can go through them one by one and try to clarify things. These are the people who are actually responsible at the university for providing support and helping you realize your ideas and plans. So just ask them whether what you've heard is true. That's always a good idea.

01:38:37 “It takes an afternoon to decide what degree to do.”

Arlett:

That brings me to one last thing, which is that this whole process just takes time. It takes more time to talk to eight people than it does to talk to one person. It takes time to look at what is on offer. It takes time to go to a lecture or to attend a lecture online. It takes time to go to a *Schülerlabor* (lab for high school students) and spend the day trying things out, soldering something together, or getting something to move. So choosing your degree is not something you can get done in an afternoon. Not even if you have an appointment with the Academic Advising Service at 2 p.m. will you know what you want to study by 4 p.m. It hardly ever works like that. That means, that if you're listening to this and you are, say, in 10th grade, you can already start thinking about this now. That doesn't mean you have to do 20 hours of reading on the subject every week. But just getting going on some small things, like going to some things put on by universities, listening to recordings like the one we're producing right now, and just getting to grips with the idea that you'll have to deal with a few of these issues before you can really make a decision that you feel comfortable with. So a good piece of advice would be to take your time.

Ulrike:

For those who are doing their *Abitur* exams right now in the middle of the pandemic and are realizing that they need to do some research on what they want to do next: The Academic Advising services are currently all online. You've already gone into that a bit. And there's still a bit more to come. I'll definitely put links to the things you're about to describe under this video on the website and also in the email that I'll send to your teachers. Arlett, can you tell us briefly what will be available in the next few months in the run-up to the winter semester 20/21?

01:40:37 Upcoming events and how to get in touch with the Academic Advising Service during the pandemic.

Arlett:

I have to make sure I don't forget anything. We usually have the Technische Universität Information Days (*Infotage*) in May, which are packed full of all kinds of information, including about the different degree programs. We're in the midst of planning that. So over the next few weeks you'll be able to find all kinds of information and services on the webpage of the Technische Universität [Academic Advising Service](#). This will include podcasts

like the one we're recording now, and also livestreamed talks where you'll be able to ask questions in the chat. These talks will replace the *Infotage*, which can't take place in person. On the webpage [StudienberatungAtHome](#), you can find all upcoming events. So, you can check that regularly if you like. There'll be new stuff that pops up on there as we go forward, because we are obviously also in a situation where we are improvising a bit. The other perhaps more important thing to say is: If you have any questions at all, or you now feel completely confused after listening to this and don't even know where to start – then get in touch. You can contact us via a form on our webpage, or you can just email us at studienberatung@tu-berlin.de. You can ask for an appointment, ask a question – you can ask us 48 questions. Get in touch. We are still here just like before, and it's our job to support you. Contact us, and we can see where you're at, make suggestions, and help you get things straight in your head so that you're in good stead to submit an application at some point over the summer.

Ulrike:

That was a great note to end on. Thank you so much for such an informative discussion. I also learned three or four new things and would also be in a better position to reorient myself! Thank you, and I hope to hear from you again in one of our upcoming podcasts.

Arlett:

Definitely. See you soon.

Ulrike:

Goodbye everyone from Ulrike and...

Arlett:

Arlett. See you soon. Bye.

Ulrike:

Bye.