



LINKING RESEARCH, POLICY AND PRACTICE



Student access and mobility

- tracking student life cycles within a student survey panel to enhance academic success

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Abstract

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Within the project *Focus on Educational Equality*, the University of Duisburg-Essen (UDE) extends their counselling and guidance programmes for students. Several subprojects are concerned with the improvement of study conditions to prevent drop out and to improve transition from school to university. The Centre for Higher Education Development and Quality Enhancement (CHEDQE) developed a student survey panel within the framework of the subproject *Study Progress Analysis*.

The survey data is collected along the student life cycle in order to identify individual and institutional factors of academic success and can be used for optimising study conditions as well as for the revision of curricula.

Presentation

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- tracking student life cycles within Student Panel to enhance academic success

Information about the UDE

The UDE is a university founded in the year 2003 by the association of the Universities of Essen and Duisburg (both founded in 1972). Thus the UDE consists of two campuses at two different locations. While Duisburg is the most important steel production site in Europe and the logistical centre of Germany with its largest inland port in Europe, Essen is the cultural and economical centre of the Rhine-Ruhr region as well as a hotspot of the service industries and the European Capital of Culture RUHR.2010.

With more than 39.000 enrolled students in eleven departments, the UDE is one of the ten largest tertiary institutions in Germany. The eleven departments are Humanities, Social Sciences, Educational Sciences, Economics, Business Administration, Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Engineering and Medicine.

Furthermore there are 442 professors, 2.691 academic members of staff and yet another 1.375 employees take care of technical and administrative services and support (excluding the Faculty of Medicine). 50% of the students are female and 16% are students from abroad. 49% of the 10,999 first-year students are female students, 20 % are international students (UDE 2013).

Why we focus on educational equality

Due to its location in the Rhine-Ruhr metropolitan area, the UDE has a very diverse student population. According to a student survey carried out in 2009, 52% of the students enrolled had a non-academic background and one quarter of them had a migration history (Müller/Kellmer 2011a; Stammen 2009). In comparison, at the Goethe University Frankfurt am Main (GUF) for example, only 37% of the students come from non-academic households according to the GUF student survey 2012 (Iden 2013).

Furthermore, the access to higher education in Germany is characterised by social inequality. For the purpose of study, students with a non-academic family background have a higher investment risk (e.g. immediate, indirect and long term study costs) than students with an academic family background (Becker 2008).

The UDE has a specific student body which requires specific benefits. Even though the UDE knows a lot about their students, there is a lot more to know for creating measures in line with the target groups.

Central issues

For fostering study success nowadays there are several central issues universities have to face and the UDE in particular because of its particular composition of their students:

- What are the specific challenges for academic and professional success against the background of sociodemographic characteristics?
- What are the institutional and individual conditional factors for study success?
- What can we do to prevent student dropout?
- How to design study programmes which focus on educational equality and which promote the academic potential of students without an academic family background?

Regarding the heterogeneity of the student body there is a huge variety of student's expectations and requirements, especially at the beginning of their studies. Hence, the UDE is faced with a high demand of educational and social policies to accommodate to the diversity among its student population. Therefore it offers a wide variety of counselling and guidance programmes for its students. The UDE does a lot to support their students and to enhance students' access and mobility as well as the study success, especially from students without an academic background.

For instance, information material for school teachers is provided so that they can support and advise their pupils in questions concerning choice of study programme and career development (website in German: <http://www.uni-due.de/uni-trainees/index.shtml>). Besides that, the UDE supports and accompanies teenagers with a non-academical background (with or without a migration history) from the ninth resp. tenth grade until Bachelor's grade within the programme *Chance hoch 2*. For example, school children are participating in workshops to improve writing skills and rhetoric skills. The programme's aim is to increase the rate of high-school graduates and university graduates within families lacking academic involvement (website in German: <http://www.uni-due.de/chancehoch2/>).

Background of the UDE-Survey Panel

These aforementioned activities are important tools, but they only reach particular and small subgroups. Since 2011, the UDE has been supported by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research within the project Focus on Educational Equality (website in German: <http://www.uni-due.de/bif/>) in which ten subprojects are bundled in a broader context. The goal is to create a framework and study conditions, which allow more students to obtain a degree - regardless of individual entry requirements. Targeted and individually tailored support shall prevent student dropout and facilitate the transition from school to university.

In order to optimise the study conditions for enhancing study success continuously, detailed information about students is required. Furthermore this information should go beyond the administrative data which are gathered throughout enrolment, e.g. academic family background, employment and family commitments.

Within the student survey in 2009 a lot of information about the student body has been gathered. In a Germany-wide comparison there are significantly more students from non-academic households at the UDE. These educational climbers have more likely a job to finance their course of study. In comparison to students from academical households they have more financial obligations and family commitments. They more often drop out of their study programmes, because of financial and familial reasons. In addition, they have greater study programme-related difficulties. Only 40% of the students with parents without any professional education get student grants (BAföG). Because of their sideline job(s), students from non-academic households get in trouble to finish their studies within the designated period of time (Müller/Kellmer 2011b).

These findings suggest the need to develop specific supportive measures for different groups of students and raise the questions, how study success can be measured and which factors support or hinder study success.

Study success is the result of a process. This implicates a prospective longitudinal survey design. With regard to long-term improvements of study conditions, information is needed which allows to determine the effects of particular factors on academic success over an extended period of time. This can be realised through a longitudinal design.

One option for realising longitudinal studies is to establish a survey panel. In a survey panel the same persons are questioned repeatedly at various points of time (Schnell 2012).

Thus, survey panel data have at least two advantages: On the one hand, a prospective survey design can minimise bias because of memory lapses, rationalisation or cognitive dissonance. And on the other hand, it can measure the change of influential factors, e.g. level of information, conditions and characteristics of the course of study or student living circumstances (Sarclotti/Müller 2011: 244).

The determinants of study success can be divided into individual and institutional determinants. The individual determinants comprise social origin, individual entry requirements (e.g. educational background; academical family background; motivation for studying; level of information) performance; social and academic integration; financial situation and circumstances like family commitments and state of health.

Institutional determinants are for example study conditions, quality of teaching, degree of difficulty of course content and scope of course content as well as support provided by the university.

Besides that, a survey panel offers another added value. It enables to conduct subgroup specific surveys or surveys due to certain events or characteristics, e.g. on the basis of sociodemographic characteristics and degree programme-related information. If there are for instance indications of problematic situations in a certain study programme, survey panel members of the affected study programme can be questioned directly within a narrow time frame. Thus, the panel is not only a tool for data gathering according to a schedule. It can also be seen as a means for fostering student's identification with their university and their integration into academic life.

In addition, the student survey panel makes it possible to discuss social inequality with regard to the background of the participation at higher education. The study progress of educational climbers and/or students with migration background could be compared to that of students with academic family background.

Taking into account the diversity of students at the UDE and the central interest to increase the graduation rates, insights into the relationship between individual background and individual education success are of great relevance. Already in the school system, there is a process of selection for obtaining the relevant qualification for university access. Despite identical school performances a social bias exists concerning who enters higher education (BMBF 2010).

As a consequence, students with a migration history or/and without an academic family background are a highly selected group (Bargel/Bargel 2010; BMBF 2010) that faces a variety of social inequalities. For instance, the decision to pursue a university degree presents a greater risk for upwardly mobile students which in turn influences the choice of study programme (e.g. educational climbers seem to rather choose short and vocation oriented programmes) as well as on the place of studying (e.g. upwardly mobile persons seem to tend to choose a university in the vicinity of the parental home) (Bargel/Bargel 2010: 10).

This social phenomenon can be explained by the effects of social origins (Boudon 1974). On the one hand, the primary effect of origin has a direct impact on the learning outcomes of the individual; parents with higher education are better endowed to support their children successfully in their school career through the intergenerational knowledge transmission and through the acquisition of the needed knowledge in form of private lessons. The secondary effect of origin influences the assessment of risk. To ensure the status of lower class families an academic degree isn't necessary. Rather it represents a risk of failure and, associated therewith, the loss of time and money.

The more crossings exist within the course of education, the more selective is the impact of the secondary effect of origin (Becker/Hecken 2008, Schlicht-Schmälzle 2011). In Germany the social origin has a crucial influence on education. According to the 20th Social Survey carried out in 2012 by the Deutsches Studentenwerk – the German National Association for Student Affairs, 77% of children from academic households start a study programme, while this is only the case for one fourth of the children from non-academic households (Middendorf et al. 2013: 12, <http://www.sozialerhebung.de/englisch>)

Structure and content of the UDE-Survey Panel

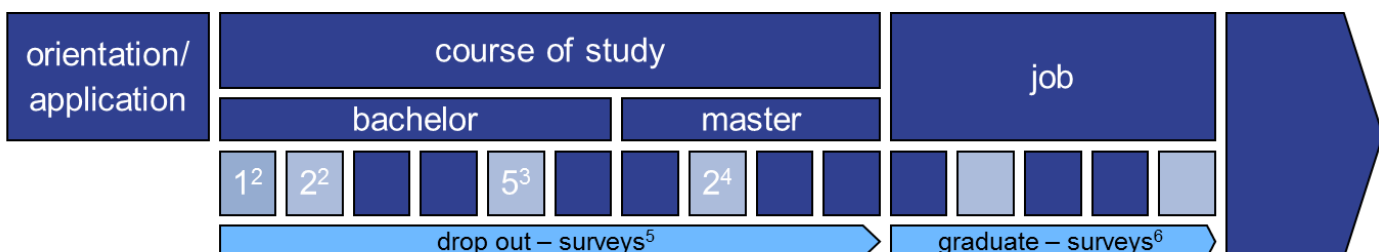
The figure below describes the ideal-typical progress of the surveys within the UDE-Survey Panel. The UDE-Survey Panel can be seen as accompanying socialization within higher education. It has been established as a consequent expansion of the comprehensive student survey in 2009.

Due to the orientation along the student life cycle, it is possible to consider neuralgic points of the study progress. This allows to analyse crucial points in the study programme which are inadequately examined at present.

Oriented on an ideal-typical study cycle, there are several instances when students are asked to complete a survey. A particular focus lies on transition phases: from school to study course, from Bachelor`s degree to Master`s degree, from graduation to professional life. There are up to six surveys (three in Bachelor`s degree, one in Master`s degree, two after the final degree) which, in the various stages of the study cycle, will examine the specific challenges for academic and professional success.

With the help of the UDE-Survey Panel, data shall be collected concerning student access and mobility, e.g. why students choose a particular study programme, why they change a study programme or why they drop out.

Figure 1: Structure of the UDE-Panel



explanation: ¹survey of first-year students; ²survey early phase of study; ³survey terminal phase of study; ⁴survey of MA-students; ⁵drop out-surveys take place regularly; ⁶graduate surveys after 1,5 & 4-5 years

Surveys of first-year students

As mentioned before, study dropout research indicates that even at the early phase of study studies factors exist which affect further progression. The student`s initial situation has a particular influence on their study progress. Therefore the UDE-Survey Panel starts with a survey of first-year students. In the introductory phase of the study course, students are asked about their levels of information, motivation for studying, expectations regarding the study course, their experiences concerning their studies as well as about socio-economic characteristics.

Survey in the early phase of study

The follow-up survey at the end of the second semester has its focus on the study conditions as well as on the integration into the academic life. The first semesters are an additional crucial study stage. During that phase, it becomes apparent to what extent the expectations regarding the course of study and the challenges posed to the students can be fulfilled. According to a survey carried out among exmatriculated students by *the Higher Education Information System GmbH* (Heublein et al. 2009), over 60% of the participating BA students abandoned the study course in the first two semesters. In contrast, that was the case for 20% of the students in the German Diploma, Magister and State examination courses. These findings indicate an increase of complex challenges posed by the requirements of integration and orientation as well as performance requirements that students face within the introductory phase of the study course. These challenges have a crucial impact on the students' subsequent course of study. The UDE-Survey Panel is allowing to evaluate the early phase of the study course, e.g. to find out if the students need further support to continue their study programme successfully.

Survey in the terminal phase of study

In the fifth semester, students will be questioned about their personal challenges of the final degree phase and about plans after their graduation. Students in the final degree phase possess expert knowledge about the study programme. They have finished the core phase of their study programme and have gathered a lot of experiences within the first semesters. Their knowledge is of a great value because it gives hints to problems in the main study phase against the background of the final degree stage. With the help of this information the student's concrete challenges and the accompanying support which the students need during the final examinations can be found out.

Dropout-surveys

Each semester, students are asked whether they are still studying, dropped out, changed university or study course. This enables the UDE to distinguish between the various forms of student dropout. Reasons for student dropout and the chosen alternatives can be asked directly.

Survey of MA-students

One year after graduation, Bachelor graduates who are now enrolled in the Master programme at the UDE are questioned about their transition phase and the specific requirements of the Master study course. Once again, levels of information, motivation for studying and expectations regarding the study course are gathered. Furthermore their experiences at the start of the study and the requirements and conditions of the Master degree are collected. In consideration of the ongoing discussions about the employability of graduates of a Bachelor's degree, the Master's student's evaluation can be analysed in comparison to their evaluation of their career prospects as graduates of a Bachelor's degree.

Graduate surveys

Bachelor's graduates who are not enrolled any more and Master's graduates are asked about their professional life, their employability and their integration into the labour market. According to a study by the *Higher Education Information System GmbH (HIS)*, the *Stifterverband for the German science system* and the *Cologne Institute for Economic Research (IW)*, 20% of the Bachelor's graduates were employed within one year of graduation (Briedis 2011: 75). Within this consolidation phase employability is a central point of interest in the context of the analysis of (subsequent) professional success. Therefore the graduates' skills are also a key interest. Furthermore, subjective and objective criteria for measuring the employment success will be analysed, e.g. income, adequateness of employment and employment satisfaction (Kühne 2009).

Five years later, the graduates will be asked once again about their professional life. Again, subjective and objective criteria of the employment success are measured because these characteristics indicate the graduates' sustainable integration into the job market.

First outcomes of the UDE-Panel

The first survey of the student survey panel at UDE took place in the winter term of 2012/13. Approximately 21% of 6.900 first-year students completed the interview. Beyond that, about 660 students agreed to take part in the follow-up surveys of the UDE survey-panel which takes place in September 2013.

About 60% of the participating students are female, 59% have a non-academic background and 27,5% have a migration history. Almost 95% acquired a general qualification for university entrance (62% in the nearby region of the UDE).

For approximately 67% of the interviewed students the vicinity of the parental home is one of the three most important reasons to choose the UDE.

About 90% feel very confident or rather confident with their decision to go to university and almost 80% are assured about the choice of their study programme in particular. Nevertheless, about 80% think that their study programme is characterized by high performance requirements and another 57% think that their study programme is too packed with examinations.

The level of information seems to be low up to medium. 58% are informed about the study plan to a very great extent or to a rather great extent. Only 33% are informed well regarding the prior knowledge needed for their study programme.

Questioned about their career prospects for graduates of their study programme, 70,5% answered very good to good. In comparison to Master graduates only 61,5% rated the career prospects as poor to much more poor. Almost 67% want to pursue a Master's degree directly after their Bachelor's degree.

Conclusion

In the UDE-Survey Panel, survey data is collected along the student life cycle in order to identify individual and institutional factors of academic success. The panel enables students to evaluate the study situation from the beginning of the study course. Thereby, they take part in the process of quality development. This first-hand information can be used for optimising study conditions and for the enhancement of curricula. It can furthermore be used to develop measures or optimise existing support services for students in order to increase access and to prevent drop out as well as to support study choices, based on thorough information. Moreover, as more knowledge is gained about the challenges that students face in the specific study phases, these findings can be the basis for the development of strategies to facilitate access to higher education, to smooth transition from secondary to higher education or from one academic programme to the next. In addition, it is possible to track graduates in their professional success. Thus, the UDE-Survey Panel supplements the existing quality management system.

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