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How do first-year interventions in German higher education seek to recognise student diversity?

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Abstract

Increasing student numbers and student diversity have led to a variety of interventions designed to support transition and to accommodate the diverse needs of first-year students. Given the lack of research on first-year support, this paper seeks to provide insights into the first-year interventions recently introduced in German HE focusing on the attempts to address student diversity. The study presented in this paper explored the objectives, the design and the implementation of first-year interventions as well as the underlying notion of student diversity. Using document analysis of HE institutions’ websites (n=80) and expert interviews (n=8) for data collection, the data on first-year interventions were analysed thematically. By revealing the different responses to first-year challenges and student diversity, the findings are intended to promote reflection on the design of first-year interventions and to serve as a basis for future research regarding the effects of first-year support.
Agenda

- Introduction
- Research design
  - Research objectives
  - Research questions
  - Methods
- Findings
  - Objectives of first-year interventions
  - Design of first-year interventions
  - Implementation of first-year interventions
- Conclusions & next steps
Introduction

• Higher Education Policy & Practice in Germany
  – General concern about study success due to the increase in student numbers and student diversity, 30% drop out rate (Wolter, 2013; Heublein, 2014)
  – Public funding for higher education institutions to improve the overall quality of teaching and learning and the first-year support in particular, e.g. Quality Pact for Teaching (BMBF, 2010)
  – Broad range of first-year interventions designed to support transition and to accommodate students’ diverse needs, e.g. tutoring, remedial courses, writing centres (Grützmacher & Willige, 2016; Bargel, 2015; Hanft, 2015)

• Higher Education Research
  – Growing interest regarding the transition to higher education, yet limited knowledge about the effects of first-year support (Jenert et al., 2015)
  – Identifying “high impact practices” (Kuh et al., 2008) requires detailed insights into the characteristics and a common framework of first-year support (Hatch & Bohlig, 2016)
Research Objectives & Questions

• Research project “StuFHe” focuses on the nexus of students’ academic competence, institutional support programmes and student diversity (Bosse, 2016)

• Present study explores the institutional responses towards diversity:

  How is student diversity recognised regarding the

  ... objectives of first-year interventions?

  ... design of first-year interventions?

  ... implementation of first-year interventions?
## Mixed-Methods Design

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Methods

• **Sample**
  – 80 German higher education institutions funded within the “Quality Pact for Teaching” (BMBF, 2010) that seek to develop the first-year curriculum and to address student diversity

• **Data collection**
  – Document analysis of university websites (n=80 HEI)
    • basic information on the HE institution
    • objectives and design features of first-year support
  – Expert interviews with first-year support programme coordinators (n=8 / 4 HEI)
    • detailed insights into the institutional context
    • implementation of first-year interventions

• **Thematic analysis of documents and interview data** (Kuckartz, 2014; Schreier, 2014)
  – Deductive and inductive coding, assisted by MAXQDA-software
Diversity Discourse in German Higher Education

• Higher education policies and strategies use “diversity” as an umbrella term to highlight differences with regard to social, individual and organisational characteristics (Bosse, 2015):

- Social
  - race & ethnicity, socio economic background, etc. (socio-structural categories)
  - disciplinary affiliation, stages in student life-cycle, etc. (institutional categories)

- Individual
  - academic skills, motivation, etc. (psychological categories)

- Organisational
Another central objective of HEI_71 is the **reduction of student drop-out rates and the support of students graduating within the standard time frame**. First-year students will therefore receive comprehensive support from central units and faculties. Furthermore, the **different levels of knowledge will be homogenised**. (HEI_71_a/11)

HEI_34 is required to **adequately support a broad and heterogeneous target group of students**. [...] students with different educational biographies and vocational experience, of different age groups and with diverse social and cultural backgrounds. The interventions therefore address the increasing diversity in students backgrounds and needs [providing] flexible and intensive support, variety in teaching and learning and intensified support for “new” target groups. The **objective is to support learning not in homogenous, but well-structured and harmonious groups of students**. (HEI_34_a/05)
Design of 1st-Year Interventions: Typology of Support Practices

- Guidance on study choice
- Induction to university and course orientation
- Facilitating study progress
- Enhancing subject knowledge
- Enhancing academic skills
- Providing applied learning experiences
- Providing flexible study pathways
- Guidance for self study
- Academic advising & counselling

Target groups & 1st-year challenges

Integrative

Short-term

Additive

Continuous
Implementation of 1st-Year Interventions: Concerns & Constraints

• Target groups
  – reaching the “right” students
  – providing support programmes for selected “groups at risk” vs. for all students

• Integration into the curriculum
  – cooperation between central units and faculties
  – establishing an institution-wide strategy

• Organisational change
  – commitment of university staff and leadership
  – facilitating sustainable innovation in the face of the temporary character of project-based funding
Conclusions & Next Steps

• First-year interventions seek to recognise student diversity by introducing a **broad range of support practices**.

• To clarify whether this **institutional diversity** is an adequate response to student diversity further research needs to
  
  – investigate how the support practices correspond to the actual **needs of first-year students**,  

  – examine the **effects of first-year support practices** employing a comprehensive typology to capture the variety of design features,  

  – discuss the **implications of the evidence on first-year support for academic development** in recognition of the different objectives and institutional constraints.
References


References


