

Emerging stratifications in German higher education? How universities transform extra teaching faculty into a surplus in quality (0212)

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During the last decades most developed countries have implemented reforms that granted more leeway to universities while at the same time increasing the number of evaluative devices to distribute state funding. Governments have set up “policies of excellence” (Rostan/Vaira 2011) that explicitly aim at reorganizing – and implicitly at stratifying – the hitherto legally homogeneous European national higher education systems or at redesigning their internal stratification, in order to better fit in the international strategic field of higher education that has emerged since the 2000s. As a consequence competition has increased between higher education institutions. To position themselves, universities try to build specific identities backed by certain organizational attributes (Bloch et al 2014).

One pillar of such efforts is to channel access. Top universities cast themselves as highly selective. However, the possibilities to limit access vary considerably between higher education systems. Anglo-Saxon universities for the most part decide individually whom and how many students they take. In contrast, in continental European higher education systems with mostly public universities access is regulated by law. Universities have only limited possibilities to influence their student numbers. As a consequence, neither selectivity nor student:staff ratios can be used for pushing forward vertical differentiations. Until recently, this has been the case for the German higher education system that was characterized by a “fictitious equality” (Kreckel 2010) according to which the degrees of all universities of the same type are of equal value. All those who have obtained the highest secondary degree, the *Abitur*, are constitutionally granted the right to study. German public universities can only restrict access if a degree program has reached its maximum enrollment limit (Winter 2013). The number of students in a degree program is determined by the teaching loads of its faculty. If the number of faculty is increased, student numbers have to be increased, too.

However, new vertical differentiations are now being introduced to German higher education and quality differences are stressed. Such efforts are mostly observed for research, for instance in the unequal distribution of resources through the Excellence Initiative (Münch 2009). Emerging stratifications between degree programs however have received little attention. Among others, they are enforced by the Bologna Process that on the one hand aims at establishing a common European study system but on the other hand has triggered processes of organizational stratification (Vaira 2009). Faced with a growing private sector (Mitterle forthcoming), German public universities as well as universities of applied sciences have extended their profile-building efforts to degree programs to position themselves (Teichler 2008), yet they have been hampered by their inability to restrict access and to alter student:staff ratios.

This situation has changed with the “Quality Pact for Teaching” that was launched by the federal and land governments in 2011. It allows the universities for the first time since 1977 to hire extra teaching faculty without having to take in more students. The political goal is to improve the study conditions

and to enhance the quality of teaching, i.e. a quantity of teaching faculty has to be transformed into a surplus in quality. Being a competitive funding scheme, universities are called to submit proposals showing how they integrate extra teaching faculty into their profile. They are addressed as organizational actors, capable of positioning themselves (Krücken/Meier 2006; Ramirez 2010).

This paper explores empirically what universities as organizations do with their extra teaching faculty. Based on an online survey of all projects funded by the Pact, we start, first, by estimating the size of the extra teaching faculty, i.e. the resources that can be used for stratification. Though they amount only to 1,500 persons they are not distributed evenly between the universities. Only 65 out of 195 projects employ extra teaching faculty, and more than half of the positions are concentrated among only seven projects. Second, we determine the surplus generated on the university level. Based on electronic course catalogues, we collected data on all courses taught in one semester at three universities and two universities of applied sciences. By differentiating between regular and extra Pact-funded courses, we quantify the surplus generated by the extra teaching faculty in terms of the amount of courses and teaching loads. We also show whether this surplus is evenly distributed among the faculties or concentrated in some. Furthermore, we differentiate the surplus with respect to course type. This allows us to show whether the extra courses reproduce regular teaching or introduce new teaching formats. Third, by drawing on organizational cases studies of five projects funded by the Pact, we analyze how a quantity of teaching faculty is transformed into a surplus in quality. The case studies involve expert interviews with faculty and administration, the observation of extra courses funded by the Pact as well as the analysis of relevant documents.

Even though the Pact provides extra resources this does not necessarily mean that these are used for vertical positioning. Based on our empirical findings, we distinguish between three functions of the extra teaching faculty for generating surplus:

- (1) *compensation*: Extra teaching faculty is used to compensate for a lack of resources. As German higher education is structurally underfinanced, extra resources are then employed for restoring the proper functioning of curricula, for instance through the parallel provision of highly frequented courses. Surplus is generated through the compensation of structural deficits and the improvement of deficient study conditions.
- (2) *extension*: Extra teaching faculty is used for new teaching formats that respond to the diversifying demand for higher education (horizontal differentiation). As a consequence of the rapid increase in higher education participation, degree programs need to be tailored to the demands of an ever more diversifying student body. New, practice-oriented teaching formats are developed. Surplus is generated through the qualitative extension of teaching.
- (3) *stratification*: Extra resources are used for strengthening certain profile-building areas in teaching (vertical differentiation). Extra teaching faculty is then concentrated in special degree programs that are distinguished by better study conditions and/or special curricula. Surplus is generated through the elevation of single degree programs.

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