

Higher Education and its Returns: Policies Challenges from a Life Course Perspective

Throughout Europe an increasing share of young people enrol in higher education. This development is in many ways intended and supported by educational policies. The individual decision for an academic career and policies in this field alike are often associated with the expectation that higher education guarantees higher returns in terms of wages or job security in later life. Thus higher education is expected to serve also important social policy aims such as reducing poverty, precarious employment or unemployment. Moreover, a highly skilled workforce is considered to be a key precondition of a prosperous economy. However, the returns of higher education vary across individuals as well as across countries. This panel seeks to elaborate in more detail the institutional (and individual) preconditions structuring the outcomes of higher education in order to identify key challenges for future educational policies. For example, the returns of higher education for women are structured by the individual and institutional parameters allowing women to reconcile family and work. The structural conditions of the labour market and education system, e.g. the existence of developed vocational education systems, may influence labour market outcomes as well. Moreover, also for young academics there are vulnerable transitions within the life course, such as career choices and/or job placement after graduation. Failure or successful coping at these important transitions of an employment career are likely to structure later outcomes of early education investments as well. Here, the question is which factors facilitate successful transitions into the labour market. The panel addresses these sociopolitical questions which likewise occupy political actors and researchers. Moreover, by addressing these questions various longitudinal databases collected and provided by the DZHW are introduced. This allows an exemplary insight in the use of government funded research centres in Germany for the European scientific community.

Creating new opportunities, facing new challenges: Reconciliation of family life and career for young academics

Thorben Sembritzki

In the German academic system successfully balancing career and family presents a major challenge for young academics. At the same time, the academic system is facing its own challenges to meet the requirements of young academics regarding partnership and family and to enable scientific careers for both women and men (Metz-Göckel et al. 2014).

Women have a strong intention of pursuing an academic career, at the same time they do not want to give up on having children (Abele 2003, 2013). Recently men as well increasingly and actively want to combine their scientific activities with (more time for) family and children (Behnke 2012; Baisch/Neumann 2008). The personal drive and structural pressure to reconcile pursuing qualification and research (e. g. PhD-studies), having children and living in a partnership thus generates various personal and structural contradictions and different challenges not only for women, but also for men.

Our research is based on the concepts of expectancy-value theory (Esser 1999) ("Wert-Erwartungstheorie") and professional self-socialization (Heinz 1991, 2001). It specifically focuses on the latitude created by "family-friendly policies" that are offered by the institutions as well as the ways young academics are discovering and using them for pursuing their ambitions for their life

courses. Beyond that we focus on how negotiation processes in different couple constellations (dual/separate career, with/without children) take an effect on the reconciliation of the different areas of professional and private lives.

Using the advantages of a mixed-method approach, we combine and integrate the findings of a quantitative, representative survey (WiNbus-panel) with a qualitative (problem-centred) interview study. At the conference we would like to present our theoretical model as well as preliminary results from both sub-studies.

The effects of subject area and parenthood on the gender wage gap among higher education graduates in Germany

Gesche Brandt

Compared to other EU countries, Germany is characterised by a comparatively large gender wage gap. Across qualification groups, it amounts to about 22% and it is especially pronounced among higher education graduates. The gap already exists when graduates from higher education enter the labour market and it rises further in the early working career. But what are the reasons for the lower incomes of highly educated women? And do the factors explaining this phenomenon change over the life course?

This paper addresses these questions by examining the determinants of the gender wage gap during the early employment history of higher education graduates in Germany. Using human capital theory, it explains why the fields of study preferably selected by women lead to lower incomes. In a further step, it shows how family-related employment interruptions and phases of part-time-work bring about gender income differences.

The gender wage gap is analysed using a decomposition method. The empirical analysis is based on the 2001 graduation cohort of the graduate panel studies conducted by the German Centre for Research on Higher Education and Science Studies (DZHW). The graduates were so far surveyed three times during the first ten years after graduation.

The results confirm that subject areas explain the largest part of the gender wage gap shortly after career entry. Ten years after labour market entry, however, the gender wage gap is mainly explained by gender-specific working histories in the context of family formation. At that time, the subject areas no longer have an effect.

The influence of the first job placement on long-term professional success of higher education graduates

Kolja Briedis

The occupational establishment of high qualified persons may take time and depends on the economic situation at the start of the career. The school-to-work-transition is a critical phase and the first job placement has relevant impact on the further career (Blossfeld 1985; Blau und Duncan 1967; Müller 1972; Korpi et al 2003). Research has focused on two different assumptions: On the one hand it is said, that disadvantages at the start of the career can be counterbalanced with job mobility (compensation model). On the other hand it is argued, that a bad career start cannot be made up later in the career (fixation model).

Up to now there is mainly empirical evidence for the fixation model. These findings result from studies conducted during the first decade of this century (Bukodi et al. 2008; Scherer 2004; Verhaest und van der Velden 2010). But research has focused on the medium-term consequences of the job start on the later career. Using data from a German graduate study – conducted by the German Centre for Research on Higher Education and Science Studies (DZHW) – it is now possible to analyse careers of higher education graduates in a long-term perspective (up to ten years after graduation) with panel data of two different cohorts.

The results confirm the assumptions of the compensation model and of the fixation model as well. On the one hand an inadequate job start is linked with a higher likelihood of an inadequate job position ten years after graduation. But on the other hand a relevant part of the graduates is able to find a suitable job even after an inappropriate start. A persisting inadequate job situation strikes only very few higher education graduates in Germany.

Are some educational systems better able to protect school-to-work transitions against the impact of the European crisis?

Bettina Kohlrausch

In political and scientific debates there is broad consensus that youngsters are suffering most from the current European crisis. However, youth unemployment rates vary severely. On the one hand, they vary between individuals within countries and on the other hand, they vary across countries. Mostly, variation of unemployment risks between individuals is explained by individual characteristics, while variation across countries is often explained by the institutional setting of the respective educational system. Concerning the former, youth unemployment is often perceived as a problem of the lower skilled. With regard to the latter the main focus of comparative institutional analysis is in the vocational education and training systems. For example, most researchers agree, that low youth unemployment rates in Germany result from the strong linkages between education and labour market provided by the so-called dual system, which guarantees comparatively safe transitions from school-to-work. However, the sole focus on vocational training systems falls far too short, since it cannot explain cross-national differences between unemployment rates of lower skilled and higher skilled youngsters. In some countries graduates and youngsters with vocational certificates face nearly similar unemployment risks and others the unemployment risks between both groups differ severely. Above, these differences even occur between countries with similar vocational training systems and economic performance.

The paper seeks to explain differences in youth unemployment rates across Europe (under control of the country's overall economic performance) but also country specific variations of youth unemployment rates between different educational groups. In contrast to the majority of research on this topic, the analysis does not only consider the institutional design of the vocational training system but also the higher education system and – most important – the permeability between both. The quantitative analysis is based on the Labour Force Survey and EUROSTUDENT. The latter provides detailed information on the inclusiveness of the higher education systems of more than 20 European countries.