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The benefits of arbitrariness: How institutional actors deal with *Studierbarkeit* and its vagueness

Abstract

Studierbarkeit or studyability has recently gained considerable prominence in higher education in the DACH region, linked to quality assurance requirements and funding reforms, yet also with a considerable variety of definitions and operationalisation attempts. The aim of this paper is therefore to shed light on how decision makers deal with the ambiguity of the issue. Analysing the strategic plans and performance contracts from all Austrian public universities since 2016 shows that the concept is linked to a multitude of different discourses and quality indicators, without establishing an “identity” of its own. The resulting ambivalence of the concept is – at least for now – highly functional for all the institutional actors involved by leaving many options open for future developments while apparently sticking to a common goal.

Keywords

Studierbarkeit, higher education policy, document analysis, institutional strategies, governance

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1 One discourse, many directions

The discourse on *Studierbarkeit* (translated as studyability, but for various reasons the German term will be used throughout this paper) is picking up speed in the German speaking countries of the European Higher Education Area, both academically and politically. In many ways, this is neither new, nor surprising: Identifying (and influencing) factors on academic success has quite a long tradition in higher education research and policy making (cf. HEUBLEIN et al., 2017; BRANDSTÄTTER et al., 2006, TINTO, 1975).

Where *Studierbarkeit* differs from this tradition is its conceptual vagueness – and rather recent emergence as a subject in its own right. RICHTER (2000), following the recommendations of the Wijnen Commission in the Netherlands, was one of the first to offer a definition and criteria, basically describing *Studierbarkeit* as the absence of factors that impede studies and study progress (pp. 61–62). In 2009, even before the new Interstate Treaty from 2017, the German Accreditation Council, a major player in the German external quality assurance system, listed *Studierbarkeit* as one of the requirements related to programme accreditations (AKKREDITIERUNGSRAT, 2013). Both sources already indicate that the origin of the term is rather political than scholarly. It seems all the more important to shed light on the “coping strategies” as *Studierbarkeit* becomes more and more important as a key political focus area, and since higher education institutions are tasked with monitoring the issue, identifying potential problems and solving them – including links to the funding of higher education institutions.

In the context of reforms on teacher education, KUHLEE et al. (2009) focus on *strukturelle Studierbarkeit* and explore the question of how conditions must be created and structured so that students can complete their degree within the standard period of study. In their report, the authors also address the issue of how a “typical student” should/could be constructed in order to serve as a benchmark for evaluating the success of the respective institutional actions. In this context, they raise a couple of issues that complicate the institutional arrangements, most notably students’ preferences and actions, and thus suggested a model that would align actions and institutional arrangements. BURCK & GRENDEL (2011) further propagated the idea of *strukturelle Studierbarkeit*, but shift the focus on structures and conditions that can be actively influenced by a higher education institution and argue for a narrower

conceptualisation. For them, *Studierbarkeit* essentially consists of creating the necessary structural conditions resulting from externally imposed minimum standards (in their case, those defined by the German Accreditation Council mentioned above). BUSS (2019b) builds on the concept of *strukturelle Studierbarkeit*, combining it with an adaptation of person-environment-fit theory and found that flexible study structures/paths have a strong impact (see also BUSS 2019a).

KREMPKOW & BISCHOF (2010) took an actor-oriented approach, advocating the importance of graduate surveys for gaining better insight into how to operationalise *Studierbarkeit*. One of their key conclusions was that findings can hardly be generalised, given the different structural and contextual factors of higher education institutions, and that the issue needs to be approached on a case by case basis. KREMPKOW later (2020) abandoned this position, juxtaposing individual and institutional factors from a cross-institutional data-set. In his paper he also strongly argues in favour of an outcome-oriented, rather than a process-oriented perspective. The study of PENTHIN et al. (2017) offers a set of categories explaining why students exceed the standard period of study based on a qualitative-explorative study. Following the perspective of the students, the majority of reasons were found in institutional and environmental factors.

In conclusion, there is still no consensus on concepts of *Studierbarkeit* and their operationalisation. Most scholars agree that there are many different aspects and factors – and that the question of responsibilities is very sensitive: Which factors can actually be influenced by whom? And for what can which actors be held accountable? However, there is a big gap concerning research on how the different (institutional) actors deal with the resulting complexity and uncertainty. Due to this combination of conceptual vagueness and practical/political relevance, it is highly relevant to examine how the main actors – in this case lawmakers, ministries, higher education agencies and higher education institutions – deal with the resulting tensions and degrees of freedom. Taking the Austrian developments of the last four years as an example, this study intends to answer the following questions: How is *Studierbarkeit* – manifestly and latently – framed within strategy papers and performance agreements of Austrian public universities? What positions are actors taking and how are they trying to influence the discourse? And which interpretations are showing structural dominance?

2 *Studierbarkeit* as an emerging issue in Austrian higher education

The Austrian higher education system offers a particularly suitable window for gaining insights into such dynamics, as *Studierbarkeit* has recently been linked to university funding. The new University Financing Ordinance (UNIFINV, 2018) adopted in 2018, stipulates that a part of the distribution of financial resources for public universities is tied to the demonstrable implementation of several quality assurance measures in teaching. Public universities have to provide evidence that they have implemented at least five out of seven possible measures (like in a cafeteria system), with two of the choices being continuous internal monitoring or external evaluation of *Studierbarkeit*. Considering that the other measures cover broad instrument areas such as course evaluations, assessment evaluations or graduate monitoring, the legal act already shows the relative importance of *Studierbarkeit* for policy makers.

In the context of the University Financing Ordinance 2018, *Studierbarkeit* also plays an important role in the performance agreements between the Ministry for Education, Science and Research and the public universities. Performance agreements are based on the universities' strategic plans and are legal contracts between the Federal Republic of Austria (represented by the Ministry for Education, Science and Research) and the public universities for a three-year period. These contracts define the available (state-funded) budget for the given period and the universities "working programme" for the same period. Such performance agreements are by now quite common across the European Higher Education Area (cf. JONGBLOED et al., 2018). In principle, the universities are autonomous in suggesting their goals and projects for a given period, beyond the target values that need to be defined in relation to the Financing Regulation. In practice, the Ministry issues a number of letters and "working aids" that state – more or less explicitly – what policy issues are considered politically important and what goals and projects are expected of the universities. To a certain extent, these expectations are tailor-made for a specific university.

A series of interconnected events in 2019, organized by the Ministry for Education, Science and Research and the Universities Austria (the Austrian Rectors' Conference) aimed to further explore and discuss different (mostly practical) approaches of higher education institutions regarding *Studierbarkeit*. Many of the introduced

practices were already well established and seemed to be reframed rather than originated in the discourse on *Studierbarkeit*. This is also in line with the results of a “good practice collection” conducted by the Austrian quality assurance agency, AQ Austria, on behalf of the Ministry. AQ Austria asked all higher education institutions across sectors to name and describe practices they considered effective or exemplary in terms of improving *Studierbarkeit*. In their final publication (AQ AUSTRIA, 2019), the agency briefly describes dozens of such practices, grouping them into categories such as “student counselling and support”, “curriculum design and implementation”, “study administration” and “teaching support”.

The Ministry cites this publication extensively on a subpage of its website dedicated to *Studierbarkeit* (FEDERAL MINISTRY OF EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND RESEARCH, n.d.), pointing to the fact that only about half of all students enrolled in Austria actually complete their studies as the main reason behind this policy focus. In addition to the AQ collection, “digitalisation” is also named as an area that holds promise for increasing *Studierbarkeit*. As we will show in our findings, this principle of linking *Studierbarkeit* to a multitude of different discourses, issues, policies, instruments and indicators, but leaving the actual connections vague and open for interpretation, is probably the defining element of dealing with *Studierbarkeit* at the system level – with many potential benefits for all actors involved.

3 Data and Method

Methodologically, we opted for a comprehensive document analysis informed by principles of grounded theory (GLASER & STRAUSS, 1967) and interpretative social research (cf. FROSCHAUER & LUEGER, 2009).

The data comes from two sources: the strategic plans (*Entwicklungspläne*) of the 22 public universities for the periods 2019–2024 and 2022–2027 (though valid for six years, many are updated more frequently), and their performance contracts (*Leistungsvereinbarungen*) with the Federal Ministry for Education, Science and Research for the period 2019–2021. All documents basically date from the period 2016–2020. Both types of documents are usually publicly available, as stipulated by law, and can be accessed via the universities’ websites or on the Ministry’s university data hub (sources listed at the end of this paper). Overall, the dataset consists

of 58 documents, of which 22 are strategic plans and 36 are performance contracts. (About 14 universities have already had two rounds of performance contracts in which *Studierbarkeit* was mentioned in the texts, thereby making the sample larger than the actual number of public universities.)

In a first step, all passages containing the term *Studierbarkeit* or containing contextual information that suggested a clear link to the concept were extracted from the documents and analysed, employing a mix of methods. Typically, such a passage does not contain more than a few lines. Whereas the concept of *Studierbarkeit* is hardly mentioned at all in the strategic plans of the 2019–2024 batch, the number of mentions increases in the 2022–2027 batch. This is already a first indicator on the very recent emergence of *Studierbarkeit* within Austrian higher education politics.

In a second step, the respective text fragments were analysed in terms of a qualitative content analysis in order to obtain an overview of the topics and relations between the topics, very much in line with FROSCHAUER & LUEGER, 2009. The leading questions for the analysis were:

In what contexts does the term *Studierbarkeit* appear? Are there similar terms/concepts? How is the term *Studierbarkeit* defined/operationalized? What other issues/policy fields/activities is the term *Studierbarkeit* connected with? How do institutional actors make use of the concept *Studierbarkeit* within those strategic documents?

Subsequently, issue maps and relations diagrams were then used to visualize the semantic landscape of the issue and to identify other issues and terms with which it is interlinked. This also helped to reconstruct typical patterns of argumentation in the text, providing important clues on how the issue was framed and utilised by the various actors. Latent connotations were examined with text analysis techniques informed by social science hermeneutics (cf. LUEGER & VETTORI, 2014), but rather with a broad comb than with the aim for a detailed hermeneutic analysis in the sense of FROSCHAUER & LUEGER (2020). The results were finally organized and structured according to the different maps emerging from the material, looking for patterns of structural dominance.

4 The emergence of a new core issue – or compliance via recycling?

Basically all public universities mention *Studierbarkeit* in their performance agreements at some point, but not all institutions included the issue in a recent version of their strategic plans. Two potential reasons for this observation seem plausible: On the one hand, the issue date of the strategic plans 2019–2022 largely predates the Ministry’s rather recent push of this issue and the universities had not yet fully digested the implications from the 2018 Financial Regulations either. On the other hand, the push to include *Studierbarkeit* efforts in the performance agreements (e. g. via the preparatory letters and the so called *working aids* from the Ministry) was much more explicit and effective, not least because of the financial aspects.

In addition, the differences in length and depth of how the issue is covered are quite considerable. Some institutions limited their efforts in this regard to agreeing to conduct internal and/or external evaluations as mandated by the *Finanzierungsverordnung*, whereas others apparently aimed at demonstrating that the concept is key to their plans for teaching and learning for the next three years. However, no university provided any explicit definitions or explanations of what they mean by *Studierbarkeit*; the focus is on what should be done with the issue: according to the documents, *Studierbarkeit* is something to be evaluated, ensured, monitored or improved – but what this means remains elusive and evokes parallels to the by now (in)famous intangibility of quality in higher education (cf. VETTORI, 2018; PISACARIU & MAHSOOD, 2016). The texts speak of “finding imminent obstacles in the system”, of “assessing the status quo”, of “identifying control options” and of “developing measures for improvement”, but without any further specifications. Objectives are ambitiously formulated, but that is to be expected in such a politically oriented genre: For example, the number of university graduates is to be increased at the same time as the quality of education, but without clear goals or target numbers. The impression of fuzziness is reinforced by the abstract and general use of language and the deployment of rather unspecific phrases in need of further interpretation.

This tendency towards vagueness does not mean that the concept is not imbued with a multiplicity of meaning(s): as the data shows, *Studierbarkeit* is certainly gaining importance, yet for the time being it borrows its core components and characteristics from a variety of other concepts rather than developing an identity of its own. Part

of this identity is created through the various “indicators” the universities name with regard to *Studierbarkeit* in the documents. None of the higher education institutions provides a model in which the indicators would be embedded or cites any sources, but from an analytical perspective at least four different types of indicators can be differentiated:

Institutional Input factors that are named in the documents as having an impact on *Studierbarkeit* are

- study requirements (also in the sense of prerequisites for a specific course), and, related to this, the pre-entry qualifications of students;
- the design of the curriculum (including its practical relevance);
- the effective implementation of the curriculum (including its alignment with stakeholder expectations);
- didactic competences of teachers, the existence of mentoring programmes, teaching designs (e. g. the share of blended learning courses);
- the amount of teaching content squeezed into programmes and courses;
- the match between learning outcomes, teaching methods and assessment forms (“constructive alignment”);
- student-staff ratio;
- and hypothetical and actual student workload.

Different patterns across different (types of) institutions

The higher education institutions can influence all these input factors and the main hypothesis behind them seems to be that each of them could be translated into a quality indicator providing clues on the actual level of *Studierbarkeit*. This group of indicators is also by far the largest and most comprehensive in the documents, signalling the institutions’ willingness to tackle the issue, but pointing to the great complexity, with so many aspects that checking individual aspects will hardly be sufficient.

The comprehensive list of input factors is complemented by a much smaller set of *environmental factors* that need to be considered, most notably the students' socio-economic conditions, their personal life and work obligations – and the degree to which this is compatible with their study obligations.

From a *process perspective*, the universities list again a comparatively small number of indicators that could be monitored, including study progress, learner progress, student performance, whether and how often students change the programme they are enrolled in, and the degree of student mobility.

Regarding *output and/or outcome*, the concept is linked to such indicators as graduation rates, degrees conferred, dropouts, labour market integration, student performance or study activity levels.

The sheer abundance of potential *quality indicators* – in particular on the input side – freely listed by the institutions is overwhelming and corresponds to the multitude of factors and aspects covered in scholarly literature (STEINHARDT, 2011; KUHLEE et al., 2009), though being arguably even broader. It will be interesting to observe how many of the indicators will actually be integrated in the various internal monitoring and external evaluation schemes – and in what form. Overall, a clear majority of the public universities promised in their performance agreements to monitor *Studierbarkeit* internally, although in many cases – in particular at the larger comprehensive universities – this promise is limited to “selected programmes” or “samples”, without any additional information on selection or sampling criteria.

Other patterns that can be observed rather clearly:

- Some institutions have not committed to explicit internal monitoring, but have promised efforts towards general quality assurance with regard to *Studierbarkeit*, which seems to be essentially the same thing – but in a different wording than the one provided by the regulation.
- A somewhat smaller group of universities also agreed to conduct some kind of external evaluation of *Studierbarkeit* and to exchange their findings with other institutions. In all of these cases, however, the universities limited themselves to selected programmes.
- Universities involved in educating (secondary) school teachers usually also have explicitly mentioned their respective efforts in this field.

- Ensuring sufficient training facilities is only mentioned as a key objective by the medical universities. This is also the only group of universities that seems to have aligned their strategies and focal points, by basically referring to identical measures across the different Austrian regions.

Raising connectivity or blurring borders?

The tendency to neither explain nor define *Studierbarkeit*, but to link it to a multitude of other terms and issues, can be observed throughout all documents and on various levels. It frequently creates the impression of a strategy based on establishing connectivity, reframing existing structures and processes, and recycling issues. Structurally dominant examples include:

- References to the National Higher Education Development Plan (GÖUEP), through which the universities demonstrate their alignment with national strategies – although it should be noted that the Ministry explicitly requires such references in the guidelines for the performance agreements.
- References to already existing initiatives funded and supported by the Ministry, such as the nationwide student and graduate monitoring initiatives STUD-MON and ATRACK.
- References to already existing structures and decision-making bodies, such as the universities' curriculum committees, which are supposed to set a focus on *Studierbarkeit* by their very mandate – and, in some cases, have done so via guidelines and policies. In one case, the institution further argues with the students' presence in such committees, who are expected to keep an eye on the issue anyway given their role as a student.
- References to already existing evaluation and monitoring initiatives and procedures, such as student workload assessment, curriculum development guidelines and feedback loops, programme level evaluations, study progress statistics, internal reporting schemes.
- References to other currently relevant discourses in the field, such as internationalisation, digitalisation, employability, inclusion and equity, outcome-based education, teaching quality and teaching and learning innovations.

Overall, it is important to note that the texts predominantly show options, rather than making clear statements. This can also be stated for the documents issued by the Ministry itself. Terms and issues are associated with each other through textual proximity or implicit relationships. From a political perspective, the great variety of factors and indicators listed by the universities – in relation to the internal and external evaluation endeavours, but essentially in all documents – demonstrate that the issue is taken seriously and that there are many opportunities to provide evidence in the context of the monitoring schemes. In this logic, it is sufficient to name the indicators and suggesting their relevance by association in order to signal compliance without actually introducing far-reaching changes. From a scholarly perspective, the comprehensive collection raises various questions about the underlying hypotheses, cause and effect models and the actual methodology of data collection and analysis – yet only time will tell whether it is actually necessary to resolve these questions or if it is mainly a matter of political viability. At present, the hypotheses behind this broad array of indicators can only be guessed at; they are not made transparent.

5 The benefits of arbitrariness

Summing up, we can see that currently *Studierbarkeit* is understood very differently by different actors and is presented as a large basket of options connected to each other, but also to a multitude of already existing processes, policy areas and discourses. Without explicit models or explanations and with many inconsistencies and latent goal conflicts, the presentation of *Studierbarkeit* in the examined strategic documents leaves the impression of arbitrariness and vagueness; and of different actors “playing for time”. But there is method to this arbitrariness, and at least in this current phase of conceptual vagueness, it can be advantageous for both the Ministry and the higher education institutions:

- Institutions show that they take the concept seriously and how much attention they are paying to it in all their teaching and learning processes and fields of operation. They signal compliance with political priorities, but do not bind themselves too strongly.
- *Studierbarkeit* is established as a core concept that refers to or is related to various other concepts, which at the same time stabilises the concept but also

makes the fact that it is still very much an empty canvas invisible. This keeps the option open for the government to reframe and redirect it in later phases, e. g. to instrumentalize it for pursuing a specific micro-political goal.

- For the time being, the links and references appear mostly superficial, which also allows institutions to quickly disentangle *Studierbarkeit* from other, more stable and well-established concepts, in case the focus of policy makers at a national level shifts to other areas and the importance of *Studierbarkeit* diminishes or disappears altogether.
- Many institutions have selected indicators that are also closely connected to university funding, pointing more or less subtly to the government's co-responsibility for improving the situation and making a first step towards claiming additional funds when the goals become more specific.
- Last but not least, by keeping everything related to the issue as vague as possible, both sides (the higher education institutions and the Ministry/government) keep some room to manoeuvre. This way, two actually incompatible messages can coexist peacefully. The higher education institutions are signalling that the issue is by no means new and that they have been dealing with it for a long time, albeit under a different name. And at the same time that the issue is rather new and complex and they will need time to adjust to any specific requirements. There is also a certain amount of risk involved, but overall it will be easier to negotiate politically once the goals have been met and agreements have been kept, at least for the immediate future.

On closer inspection, one even finds some daring, subversive argumentative strategies. One university explicitly links the improvement of *Studierbarkeit* to the goal of “university teaching once again living up to its reputation (and tradition)”, indirectly criticizing the increasingly regulated and school-like organisation of curricula and university schedules and ignoring – intentionally or unintentionally – that *Studierbarkeit* will more likely lead to more standardisation. This interpretation, like all the others, has also been countersigned by the Ministry, since the performance agreements act as a two-side contract, regardless who wrote them in the first place. Such an example shows once again that all options are currently wide open, coexisting even though logically incompatible, and that the race for interpretative sovereignty has not even begun.

In summary, we find a quite complex situation. This complexity might even be actively invoked or at least consciously tolerated, as the entire sector – including the Ministry – appears to be waiting and assessing potential opportunities and risks. In this respect, this paper aims to contribute to the discourse on *Studierbarkeit* by highlighting the political and contested character of the concept and how its use might have consequences far beyond optimising curricular processes and student support efforts. It will be interesting to observe how the situation develops over the next three to six years. By the time this paper is written, universities are already in the middle of finalising the next three-year performance contracts. Comparing the two periods will provide clues as to where the discourse is heading, which patterns of interpretation and argumentation will stabilise and which will not, and whether *Studierbarkeit* will develop an identity of its own beyond its current status as a prominent term that thrives on cross-referencing.

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