Call for special issue
Studierbarkeit and Academic Success – between Concepts, Analyses and Management Practice

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To the main topic

Studierbarkeit and academic success are among the most frequent topoi in the discussion on teaching and studying at HEIs in the German-speaking world since the so-called Bologna Process gained momentum with the Bologna Declaration (1999). Since then, higher education policy and accreditation have been increasingly calling for Studierbarkeit in particular, and discussions on (factors influencing) academic success have been taken up time and again. Looking back on these discussions, it is worth noting: There is still no consensus on concepts of Studierbarkeit and their operationalisation, on how to deal with concepts, analyses and appropriate monitoring strategies. With this call we would like to address the entire cycle of ideas from the conceptualisation of Studierbarkeit and analyses to implementation and control in higher education (policy) practice. We therefore invite both conceptual and empirical contributions as well as reports from practice, which can be devoted in particular to the following more detailed topics:

- **Concepts of Studierbarkeit:** Up to now, relatively few conceptual works on Studierbarkeit can be found in the research literature. One early work is that of RICHTER (2000, p. 161f.), who, following the recommendations of the Wijnen Commission in the Netherlands, formulated a definition ("Studiability is the absence of factors that hinder study") and derived criteria for Studierbarkeit. The criteria can thus be divided into a performance perspective (can the programme be successfully studied in terms of the performance requirements?) and a time perspective (can the programme be completed in the planned time?), each of which can be operationalised in different ways (cf. e.g. KREMPKOW, 2009, 2020; PENTHIN et al., 2017; STEINHARDT, 2011). A concretisation of the concept is structural Studierbarkeit, which focuses on the design of institutionally anchored study structures that control study behaviour (e.g. attendance of courses, taking examinations) (BUß, 2019a; BURCK & GRENDEL, 2011). In addition to concepts originating from research projects, there are also attempts at conceptualisation coming from the field of quality assurance. Already in 2008, the German Accreditation Council formulated as a requirement for the HEIs in its criteria for the accreditation of study programmes: "[The study programme concept] is studyable, above all taking into account the expected entry qualification, real workload, organisation of examinations, existing counselling and support services, design of practical parts and recognition rules for externally provided services" (AKKREDITIERUNGSRAT, 2008). The German state regulations on study accreditation define Studierbarkeit as a reliable course of study with

freedom of choice, plausible workload and an appropriate examination density; it must be guaranteed that studies can be completed within the standard period of study.

- **Interdependencies and Operationalisation of Concepts:** Only a few authors attempt to describe and empirically verify interdependencies (e.g. LÖRZ & QUAST, 2019). This is also due to the challenge that a large number of criteria and influencing factors can be included in a study (KUHLEE et al., 2009; LENZ et al., 2006; STEINHARDT, 2011). In addition, the result of Studierbarkeit can be defined in very different ways – from quantitative figures such as study in the standard period of study, grades or academic success to the acquisition of student competences. The above-mentioned studies on structural Studierbarkeit focus on the study structure to facilitate operationalisation (for an overview, see BUß, 2019a). A distinction can also be made between outcome-related (e.g. completion within the standard period of study, length of study), process-related (process quality of the study programme) and starting conditions (consideration of different study ability) perspectives, for which both higher education statistics and survey results are used (KREMPKOW, 2009). On the basis of a comprehensive survey across all Austrian HEIs, AQ AUSTRIA (2019) proposed a systematisation of Studierbarkeit and thus divided it into the categories counselling, support and assistance for students, curriculum design and implementation, study organisation and support for teachers.

- **Analyses:** In order to be able to identify concrete options for action in the context of quality assurance and development, more comprehensive empirical analyses are helpful (cf. e.g. VETTORI et al., 2015). These also aim to avoid misguided measures – for example in Austria, where Studierbarkeit was linked with financing issues. The new University Financing Ordinance (UniFinV, 2018) adopted in 2018 stipulates that a part of the distribution of financial resources is tied to the demonstrable implementation of quality assurance measures in teaching. This is either checked by continuous monitoring or an external evaluation of Studierbarkeit. If, in such a case, only one single indicator were used to measure Studierbarkeit, the consequences would be fatal (cf. POHLENZ, 2018). Therefore, adequate models are needed that capture central potential influencing factors and can be applied in QA practice at HEIs. For modelling empirical analyses, both models of study success (for an overview of current research cf. DANIEL, SCHMIDT & KREMPKOW, 2019) and individual models specifically on Studierbarkeit, such as those by BUß (2019a) or PENTHIN et al. (2017) can be used. When designing models, it is important to take individual and institutional factors into account. One question that is often discussed is the extent to which universities or those responsible for programmes have an influence on Studierbarkeit. While HEIs can hardly influence individual requirements, in principle, at least institutional factors can be controlled by designing (examination) regulations, course and examination planning or support services. There are different perspectives on the role of individual factors. In most cases, study prerequisites, employment or parenthood are seen as independent factors that influence, for example, academic success. Since HEIs have a heterogeneous student body, individual factors can also be seen as a counterpart to the content and structural factors of the degree programme - in terms of Studierbarkeit as a fit between students' needs or requirements on the one hand and the services offered by the HEI on the other (cf. BUß,

2019b; CAPLAN, 1987). The aforementioned individual (entry) requirements of students are also assigned to the initial conditions in process models of higher education (cf. KREMPKOW & BISCHOF, 2010; BLÜTHMANN et al., 2011; PENTHIN et al., 2017; KREMPKOW, 2020). They are usually used as control variables in empirical analyses of Studierbarkeit or academic success.

- **Control Practice:** For years now, Studierbarkeit has been used as an argument for steering higher education. The results of Studierbarkeit are considered indicators of academic success. For several years now, the proportion of students or graduates in the standard period of study (in some cases + 2 semesters) has also been used as an indicator in models of performance-oriented allocation of funds, for example at the country or state level between the universities, but also in some cases within HEIs. In Germany, such use of indicators is of additional relevance because the indicator of students in the standard period of study is now also used to distribute a large part of the Higher Education Pact Succession Funding from the Federal Government and the Federal States. In Austria, the legal provisions on Studierbarkeit address the various higher education sectors to varying degrees. For the vast majority of public universities, the question of Studierbarkeit was not only prominently and guidingly anchored in the above-mentioned Federal Financing Regulation, but was also included in the performance agreements to be concluded between universities and the Ministry every three years. In the area of the Austrian Fachhochschulen, for example, the law stipulates that it must be possible to complete the studies within the planned study period. This is also required of the universities by some German Federal States. Such a development is critical because the control models make assumptions about the measurability of Studierbarkeit, some of which are not empirically proven. It would therefore seem fruitful to bring together the strands of discourse on Studierbarkeit and higher education governance. Research on higher education governance often emphasises that the influenceability of the indicators at the respective level is an essential prerequisite for the effectiveness of (financial) incentives (cf. e.g. GRANDE et al., 2013). By using certain indicators, e.g. the proportion of students in the standard period of study, which in some cases can hardly be influenced by HEI officers (cf. KREMPKOW, 2020), the intended incentive effect cannot ultimately be achieved (cf. also PENTHIN et al., 2017). It would rather be foreseeable that especially those HEIs with higher proportions of (de facto) part-time students and/or with poorer Abitur or Matura grades, parents, and those with stays abroad would have to fear noticeable financial losses simply because of this - at least if no accompanying measures are taken. And this despite the fact that these universities in particular must work harder to adapt their study programmes to the needs of their students and thus require resources to do so. This finding suggests that models and indicators of performance-based funding currently in practice or under development should be reviewed and further developed. Ideally, such findings should already be taken into account when designing higher education funding, but at the latest when evaluating it. For example, considering the different composition of students/graduates could compensate for the different starting conditions for adhering to the standard period of study. In concrete terms, this could be done in the performance assessment of HEIs, for example, by means of indicator adjustment according to the added value approach. In

Australia, for example, this has already proved successful (cf. HARRIS, 2007) and could be adapted for other countries (cf. KREMPKOW, 2015).

Possible questions that arise in this context:

Models and Operationalisation

- Which concepts of Studierbarkeit can be used as a basis at individual universities and beyond (at the level of interest groups, ministries, national agencies, etc.)? Are there differences in the approaches of different groups of actors and stakeholders?
- In which discourses is Studierbarkeit currently embedded and in what form (quality assurance, teaching development, higher education funding, inclusion and diversity...)?
- Where are similarities and/or differences in terms of concepts of academic success? What could any further differentiation look like? How do other concepts overlap or interact with each other?

Analyses

- Which models are used to analyse factors influencing Studierbarkeit?
- Which methods of analysis are used to examine Studierbarkeit and, if applicable, in connection with it, study success at universities? Which methods of analysis have proved empirically successful?

Thematic Field of Control

- How do different actors deal with the concept of Studierbarkeit – conceptually, tactically, practically (e.g. governance perspectives, links to mission statements, teaching as a management principle, lines of argumentation, agreements on objectives and performance)?
- How is Studierbarkeit realised and promoted in higher education institutions – by presenting a systematic critical analysis?
- What are indicators that can be used to make Studierbarkeit measurable?
- What incentive systems are there in HEIs and in different countries, and what findings are available on their appropriateness and effectiveness?

We look forward to receiving contributions that shed light on Studierbarkeit and related aspects of academic success in connection with the above-mentioned topics or beyond. Ideally, this would include a discussion of the interaction in the ideas cycle or in several sub-areas from conceptualisation and analysis to implementation and governance practices or the evidence-based development of new practices.

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Questions?

If you have any questions regarding the content of the issue, please contact René Krempkow (rene.krempkow@hu-berlin.de), Oliver Vettori (oliver.vettori@wu.ac.at) or Imke Buß (info@imkebuss.de).
For technical and organizational questions, please contact Michael Raunig (office@zfhe.at).

We look forward to your submissions!

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