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The social stratification of student trajectories through German higher education: A sequence-analytical approach

Student numbers in German higher education have increased tremendously during the past decades. Further, higher education has formally opened up, especially to students not following the traditional route via the *Gymnasium*. Consequently, the student population has become more heterogeneous as enrolment rates of students from all social strata have increased (Shavit et al. 2007; Wolter 2015).

However, students from lower social strata may not only enter higher education through different routes and make different decisions at major transition points, but their trajectories in higher education may systematically differ as well. Yet, not much is known on students' higher education trajectories after enrolment.

As will be argued along Lucas' (2001) *Effectively Maintained Inequality* thesis, students' strategies regarding their higher education trajectories may systematically differ by social origin leading to differences in timing, discontinuities or detours. Two contrasting hypotheses regarding students' trajectories will be discussed and empirically tested.

The analysis is based on the student cohort of the National Education Panel Study (NEPS; Blossfeld et al. 2011), a representative largescale panel dataset on first-time enrolling students in Germany. The analysis consists of three consecutive steps: reconstructing trajectories in higher education using sequence analysis, clustering sequences to identify major trajectory types and multinomial logistic regression to test our hypotheses.

Preliminary results identified distinct groups of higher education trajectories. Some of these trajectory clusters are smooth, marked by successful study completion followed by master studies or labour market integration while a few trajectory types are marked by interruptions, discontinuities, delays and/or changes.

Further, there is a social gradient in trajectory types followed. Students from less advantaged backgrounds have a higher propensity to follow non-completing and protracted trajectories. Decomposing these social origin differentials using the KHB method indicate that these differences can be mostly explained with reference to the higher education institution (university vs. university of applied sciences), achievement, information differentials and the prior educational biography.

Keywords: trajectories in higher education; social origin; higher education expansion; sequence analysis; study patterns; study progress

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