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An integrative perspective on educational pathways in the phase of study entrance

Education has long been recognized as an essential element in life course. Especially the decision to participate in tertiary education has an important influence on the subsequent career path (OECD, 2016). Unfortunately, the percentage of students who drop out remains at a relatively high level of about 30% in recent years not only in general across OECD countries (OECD, 2016; 2018), but also in specific in Germany (Heublein et al., 2017). This is considered to be unacceptably high (e.g. Heublein et al., 2015; OECD, 2014). Although there are institutional attempts to intervene, these are usually not based on scientific models of dropout. This might be due to the fact that existing models have either a very narrow theoretical focus or are not yet empirically validated, especially not for the German student population (e.g. Heublein et al., 2017). We therefore (1) examined and compared four existing models theoretically and empirically to determine their utility for this population. We conducted two longitudinal studies to track two cohorts of study entrants. Using data from the first cohort, we compared model fit. (2) We then developed a new process model with an integrative broad theoretical perspective, based on existing models (Spady, 1971; Tinto, 1975; Neuville et al., 2007; Lent & Brown, 2013), recent meta-analytic (Robbins et al., 2004; Richardson, Abraham & Bond, 2012) and on our empirical findings. (3) Independent data from the second cohort served to validate it. Additionally, a second validation study was performed using cross-sectional DZHW data (Middendorff et al., 2016). The new model revealed a good model fit and proved its utility. Thus, it could serve as a framework for future research and counseling in tertiary education in Germany. Tailoring interventions to the identified key elements may help concentrating limited counseling resources to the most promising aspects.

Keywords: dropout, integrative perspective, process model, study entrance, tertiary education

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