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Bologna-Reforms and Social Inequality in Germany: Social Selectivity Beyond the Transition to Master Degree Programs?

In the late 1990s, the Bologna reforms were introduced in Europe with the goal to create a European Higher Education Area that facilitates student mobility between countries and comparability of degrees due to a similar consecutive degree structure (Bologna 1999). Even though emphasized comparatively late in the process, another goal was increasing participation of disadvantaged groups in higher education.

Previous studies focusing on social selectivity at the transition from Bachelor to Master degree programs have demonstrated that, the goal to reduce inequalities has had no - or only limited success (Auspurg & Hinz 2011, Kretschmann et al. 2017, Lörz et al. 2015, Neugebauer et al. 2016). The differentiation between primary and secondary effects has been used as the theoretical framework for differential educational decisions (Schindler & Reimer 2010, Watermann et al. 2014). Therefore, the aim of this presentation is twofold: The first objective (i) is to provide a systematic review of the empirical literature studying the "social dimension" of the Bologna reforms – mainly addressing vertical stratification. The second objective (ii) is to provide an in-depth analysis. Using data from DZHW graduate cohort of 2009, we replicate previous studies and analyze levels of social inequality at that "new transition". We then go beyond previous work by also analyzing the occurrence of horizontal stratification – focusing on two outcomes: (a) changing from low-status to higher status fields of study and (b) changing from lower-reputed to higher-reputed places of studies.

First of all, we are able to replicate previous findings that show that there are considerably social background effects at the transition from Bachelor to Master degree. Furthermore, additional results indicate that there is social stratification beyond this vertical transition. Social inequalities are, (at least) to some extent further maintained by subtle field of study and university changes throughout students' career in higher education.

Keywords: Bachelor-Master system, Bologna-Reforms, DZHW graduate survey 2009, Germany, Social selectivity