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## Stratification and Geographic Student Mobility

Choosing higher education requires graduates from upper secondary education to make several decisions: (1) choosing higher education or vocational training, (2) where to apply, and finally (3) where to enroll after being admitted to a higher education institution (Nurnberg et al. 2012). Our contribution is concerned with the latter step in the decision-making process. In Germany, literature has pointed out that student beginners tend to choose a university that is a local one or very close to their home town (Lischka et al. 2010; Lörz 2008; Nutz 1991; Nutz 2002; Willich et al. 2011). Spatially, higher education institutions are not evenly distributed in Germany and vary in stratification (Baier & Schmitz 2012; Fritsch & Piontek 2015; Hüning et al. 2017) which makes this finding somewhat surprising. This “geographic immobility” can be interpreted in a way that reputation, unique characteristics or quality of higher education institutions are not the main concern of student beginners. Instead, importance of emotional or monetary costs of moving away for studying is much greater. However, it has been shown that the costs of studying further away are especially difficult to bear for families with fewer economic resources (Denzler & Wolter 2010; Helbig et al. 2017; Spiess & Wrohlich 2010). Since costs of mobility are connected to social inequality, it is argued that staying at home for higher education is rather a phenomenon in lower social status groups. However, literature also argues that valorization of reputation and quality of higher education institutions is also bound to social inequality: Less mobility is a feature of lower status groups because stratification of higher education is less relevant for them and therefore limits their choice further (Ball et al. 2002; Christie 2007; Holdsworth 2009; Reay et al. 2009). Accordingly, stratification within the field of higher education and its unequal importance to different status groups is expected to explain some part of the inequality of the distance. We derive two hypotheses: higher status groups, i.e. upper and middle class, academic milieu as well as high ability students, should be more mobile even after controlling for monetary and emotional costs of moving (H1). Rankings and reputation are more important to higher status groups and should explain their greater geographic mobility (H2). Using data by *Studienanfängerbefragung 2003-2011* by DZHW, we calculated the distance between a student beginner’s home town and chosen higher education institution and used it as the dependent variable. We estimated OLS regression and KHB analysis (Kohler et al. 2011). Indeed, we find significantly greater distances for higher status groups and a significant non-linear effect of importance of rankings to choose a more distant university. However, importance of rankings mediates higher status groups’ greater geographic mobility only to a small extent. In a median regression as well as in a multi-level analysis, the results were robust. This suggests that status groups do not differ much in valuing stratification in higher education. A main implication that we discuss relates to the ongoing debate of vertical differentiation and “elite education” in German higher education: It has been argued that stratification of higher education is not only produced by organizations but could also be driven by student beginners’ choices (Krüger et al. 2012). Our findings

indicate that stratification of higher education is (at most) only accentuated by these choices in Germany.

**Keywords:** geographic distance, vertical differentiation, rankings, reputation, social inequality

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