



More diversion than inclusion? Social stratification in the Bologna system



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ABSTRACT

In the course of the Bologna process, traditional one-cycle degree programs have been re-arranged into two successive cycles (bachelor's and master's). In many European countries, this has created a new tertiary degree level below those previously offered. Focusing on Germany, this paper studies the consequences of this new form of differentiation for social inequality. First, we analyze social origin effects on the decision to continue higher education or to leave with a bachelor's degree for a recent post-Bologna cohort. We find that parents' education has a pronounced influence on the probability of their children's enrolment in the second cycle, comparable in size to the effect of parents' education on children's initial tertiary enrolment. Second, the observed gap in enrolment rates is largely the result of indirect influences, most importantly, type of institution. Third, we analyze changes in social origin effects on completion of a master's or traditional equivalent level program over time. Drawing on data from pre- and post-Bologna cohorts, we find that the share of graduates from low educated parents at the master's or equivalent traditional degree level decreases, when study courses adopt the two-cycle structure. Our findings stand in sharp contrast to an official goal of the Bologna Process, namely to support underrepresented groups in the framework of the so called 'social dimension'.

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1. Introduction

At the end of the last millennium, European ministers in charge of higher education initialized a set of far-reaching reforms that are known as the Bologna Process. Today, 48 countries participate in this endeavor, which has harmonized higher education systems across Europe, to enhance the competitiveness, mobility and employability of their students (Powell, Bernhard, & Graf, 2012). Among the various measures taken to foster mobility and structural convergence in a common 'European Higher Education Area' (EHEA), the most notable is the adoption of a two-cycle degree structure, consisting of a first-cycle (bachelor's), and a second-cycle (master's).¹ While in some countries, such as the U.K, a two-cycle structure was already in place, in many other European countries, among them Germany, Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Italy, and Portugal, the two-cycle structure replaced long one-cycle degrees

(for an overview see Eurydice, 2010). One of the consequences is that a first tertiary degree can be obtained in a shorter time period than before the reform, which allows students to enter the labor market more rapidly. A second consequence is that a new transition between cycles has been created, which did not previously exist. Both of these changes can be expected to have effects on the amply noted social inequality in higher education. In this paper, we discuss and analyze the social consequences of this reform. We focus on Germany, the country with the largest higher education system in terms of student numbers (Eurostat, 2016) and higher education institutions (ETER, 2016), where a two-cycle structure has been recently established.

Firstly, such an analysis is important from a *policy perspective*, given that the actors of the Bologna Process aim to enhance equal opportunities in higher education. In an agreement termed the 'social dimension', the participating countries commit themselves to reduce social gaps, to improve access to higher education, and to foster the successful completion of first and second cycle study programs for groups underrepresented in higher education (Benelux Bologna Secretariat, 2009; Bucharest Communiqué, 2012; Eurydice, 2011; Leuven/Louvain-La-Neuve Communiqué, 2009; London Communiqué, 2007). Are the hopes of the Bologna Process

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¹ A detailed description of the Bologna Process can be found on the official European Higher Education Area website <http://www.ehea.info/>. In recent years, a doctoral degree was officially incorporated as a third-cycle in the Bologna degree structure.

initiators met, because the new study structure helps to countervail the underrepresentation of the socially disadvantaged?

Secondly, the analysis is intriguing from a *theoretical perspective*, because the creation of two different degree levels indicates a new form of differentiation in higher education. This provides us with the opportunity to re-examine and contribute to the large body of literature, which is concerned with the consequences of differentiation for social inequality. This literature focuses on differences in the length, selectivity and prestige of institutions, programs, or fields of study (Arum, Shavit, & Gamoran, 2007; Ayalon, Grodsky, Gamoran, & Yogeve, 2008; Brint & Karabel, 1989; Davies & Guppy, 1997; Dougherty, 1994; Gerber & Cheung, 2008; Goyette & Mullen, 2006; Roksa, 2008; Reimer & Jacob, 2011; Triventi, 2013; Schindler & Reimer, 2011). Such forms of differentiation are relevant for stratification research, because students from disadvantaged families are more likely to enter the less prestigious alternatives, while their privileged peers are more likely to attend prestigious alternatives. At the core of this literature is the question of whether differentiation reduces inequality by providing more tailored opportunities for persons from disadvantaged origins (e.g. Arum et al., 2007), or whether it increases inequality by channeling less privileged students away from the most prestigious positions (e.g. Brint & Karabel, 1989). The Bologna Process may entail both, inclusion and diversion. On the one hand, the shortening of the first cycle by 1–3 years reduces study costs, which may have an *inclusive* effect especially for students from low social origins, who would otherwise not have entered higher education at all. On the other hand, the creation of a new transition between cycles may *divert* less privileged first-cycle graduates into the labor market, who would have continued their studies in an integrated one-cycle system, without an exit point after a shortened first cycle. Because those who leave the education system with a bachelor's degree achieve less privileged labor market positions and lower earnings than both, traditional degree holders and master's graduates (Rehn, Brandt, Fabian, & Briedis, 2011; Schomburg, 2011b), such a diversion would increase social inequality in labor market outcomes.

The present study sheds light on these issues. While it is well known that persons from low social origins are considerably underrepresented in higher education (for Germany see: Mayer, Müller, & Pollak, 2007; Neugebauer & Schindler, 2012), research on the effects of the new study structure on educational inequality is just in its fledging stages. For Germany, recent contributions indicate that the introduction of short bachelor's degrees did not raise higher education enrolment per se (Horstschräer & Sprietsma, 2015), nor did it lead to an inclusion of students from lower social origins, who would have refrained from entering higher education in the absence of the reform (Neugebauer, 2015). The present study complements this work by analyzing the transition to the master's level. Extending existing research which has been mostly descriptive or based on locally restricted samples (see Section 3 for details), our contribution is threefold: First, we rely on the most extensive graduate survey in Germany to describe the size of social origin effects, measured in terms of parents' education, at the transition between cycles. The analysis reveals a substantial effect of parents' education on master's continuation propensity. To gain a deeper understanding as to why transition rates differ, the second contribution of this study is an analysis of the channels through which parents' education indirectly influences master's enrolment. The pathways that mediate the gap include type of institution at which the bachelor's degree was obtained, and field of study, amongst others. Third, we assess whether the newly established transition changed the relationship between social origin and higher educational attainment. Using repeated cross-sectional graduate survey data from 2007 to 2014 to generate panel data at the level of study courses, fixed-effects estimators indicate that the introduction of the reform reduced the share of Master's graduates coming from

low educated families on average by about 5%. In sum, our results suggest that the two-cycle structure enhances social inequality in a way not intended by the initiators of the Bologna Process. Our findings stand in contrast to the notion that differentiation leads to less inequality.

Before presenting the empirical results, we describe the implementation of the Bologna Process in Germany, present previous research, and theorize on the mechanisms that generate inequality in transitions. The last section concludes and highlights the importance of comparative research, to carve out how educational institutions affect social stratification.

2. Institutional background

Traditionally, German universities awarded long one-cycle degrees (called 'Diplom', 'Magister', and 'Staatsexamen') which would lead directly to the master's level. At less prestigious universities of applied sciences, the slightly shorter and more practically oriented 'Diplom (FH)' degree was awarded, which can be located somewhere between the bachelor's and the master's level (HRK, 1997). Besides two main types of higher education institutions, shorter and academically less demanding vocational education and training (VET) programs are a frequently chosen postsecondary alternative with favorable employment prospects for upper secondary school graduates (Becker & Hecken, 2009; Reimer & Pollak, 2010).

To channel a majority of students more rapidly into the labor market, the adoption of a two-cycle degree structure was suggested as early as the 1960s (Wissenschaftsrat, 1966). However, it was not until the start of the Bologna Process in 1999 that such a structure was established on a larger scale. In the winter semester of 2013/2014 the restructuring is largely completed, as 87.4% of all study courses in Germany lead to a bachelor's or master's degree (HRK, 2013). The remaining 12.6% mainly lead to a 'Staatsexamen' degree, which is still the standard degree in regulated professions such as medicine, law, and (to a lesser extent) teaching. Perhaps not accidentally, fields with the highest prestige and the highest share of students from privileged backgrounds – medicine and law – are firmly adhering to the traditional degree system. In all other fields, a bachelor's degree, typically lasting 3 years, completes the first cycle, followed by a 2-year master's program, with some variation.² These degree types are now awarded at both types of higher education institutions.

A first consequence of this restructuring process is the possibility to leave the higher education system with a degree after a shorter time of study. De facto, the length of study needed to obtain a first degree is reduced by 1–3 years. An often expressed hope is that the shortening might lead to the inclusion of students who would have otherwise opted for vocational training in the well-established dual vocational education system. In fact, the proportion of a cohort entering tertiary education increased substantially since the introduction of the new degrees, from 30% in 2000–53% in 2012 (Federal Statistical Office, 2014). At the same time, the proportion of a cohort entering vocational education decreased. However, this trend seems to be independent from the reform, at least in Germany. While findings from Portugal and Italy suggest that the reform caused tertiary enrolment to increase

² The length of bachelor's and master's programs can vary across institutions and countries. The ministerial communiqués state that first cycle qualifications should last a 'minimum of three years', while master's degrees should 'range between 60 and 120 ECTS credits', i.e. 1–2 years. In Germany, the median study duration is about 3.3 years for a bachelor's and 2.2 years for a master's degree. Pre-reform degrees had a median study duration of 6 years at universities and of 4.4 years at universities of applied sciences (Federal Statistical Office, 2014).

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