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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Leišytė, L., Mergner, J., & Bosse, E. (2019). The widening participation agenda in German higher education: discourses and legitimizing strategies. *Social Inclusion*, 7(1), 61-70. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v7i1.1605>

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Article

## The Widening Participation Agenda in German Higher Education: Discourses and Legitimizing Strategies

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Submitted: 8 June 2018 | Accepted: 19 September 2018 | Published: 10 January 2019

### Abstract

Although participation in higher education (HE) has expanded in Europe, social inequalities remain a major political challenge. As HE expansion has not led to equal access and success, the mechanisms behind policies seeking to reduce inequalities need to be examined. Focusing on the widening participation agenda, this article investigates how universities translate political demands to their local contexts. The translation perspective is adopted to study the German HE system as an example characterized by high social exclusion. Based on policy document analysis, the study first explores the rationales underlying the discourse on widening participation. Second, a multiple case study design is used to investigate the organizational responses to the demand of widening participation. The findings indicate that the political discourse is dominated by two perspectives that regard widening participation as either a means to bring about social justice or to ensure a reliable pool of skilled labor. The study further reveals that different legitimizing strategies serve to link the policy of widening participation to local contexts. This study contributes to research on social inequalities in HE by introducing a translation perspective that permits analysis at both macro and organizational levels, while acknowledging institutional variations in organizational responses to political demands.

### Keywords

German higher education; legitimizing strategies; policy discourse; qualitative content analysis; Scandinavian institutionalism; translation perspective; widening participation

### Issue

This article is part of the issue “Inequalities in Access to Higher Education: Methodological and Theoretical Issues”, edited by Gaële Goastellec (University of Lausanne, Switzerland) and Jussi Välimaa (University of Jyväskylä, Finland).

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### 1. Introduction

The shift from elite to mass higher education (HE) system has resulted in the expansion of participation rates that has not necessarily lead to ensuring access for groups who have been traditionally underrepresented in HE (Osborne, 2003; Schuetze & Slowey, 2002). Facilitating access and participation is strongly voiced in the European policy agenda (Goastellec, 2008, 2012). Germany provides an example of introducing political reforms to promote wider participation in an HE sys-

tem characterized by a traditionally high level of social exclusion (Mergner, Mishra, & Orr, 2017). This can be traced back to the institutional separation in Germany between academic and vocational education, representing the “German education schism” (Wolter, Banscherus, Kamm, Otto, & Spexard, 2014, p. 12).

Access to HE is still primarily determined by school-based qualifications that are in most cases acquired at Gymnasiums (Orr & Hovdhaugen, 2014). However, there is no clear and consistent definition of widening participation. Depending on the national background, the po-

litical discourse on widening participation entails rather different ideas about equal access and success. Further, since widening participation represents not only a political demand, but also a social one, institutions and actors translate these ideas very differently, depending on their own institutional context and identity. Consequently, the question of whether inequalities in HE access and success have been either exacerbated or reduced is often met with controversy, depending on the definition of widening participation (Clancy & Goastellec, 2007).

In addition to the varying meaning given to widening participation, there is a lack of research on how German HE institutions respond to this political demand and how it can be explained theoretically. According to neo-institutional assumptions, it is expected that HE organizations comply with this demand—at least on a rhetorical basis—to fulfill normatively appropriate behavior and ensure their legitimacy (Brunsson, 1989). The result is organizational isomorphism, which provides only a limited role for agency on the side of organizational actors (Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2009). Contrary to this theoretical assumption, a closer look at the organizational level reveals that HE institutions differ considerably in the way they approach the call for promoting access and participation and the extent to which they turn it into a relevant issue for their own agenda (Hanft, 2012; Kehm, 2000). This observation calls for a theoretical approach that highlights the intentional actions taken by organizational actors to meet external expectations (Greenwood, Oliver, Sahlin, & Suddaby, 2008). However, very little is known about the mechanisms behind different responses and how universities legitimize them.

To provide empirical insights into the mechanisms behind the policies seeking to reduce inequalities, this article is guided by two research questions. First, it examines what constitutes the idea of widening participation within the political discourse in Germany. Second, it investigates how this idea is translated within the local contexts of HE institutions. To achieve these research aims, this study adopts a *translation* perspective (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996), which appears particularly suitable for studying both the macro level of the political discourse and the organizational level of HE institutional responses.

## 2. The Travel of the Idea of Widening Participation

### 2.1. A Translation Perspective

The concept of translation has its origin in the wider theoretical context of Scandinavian Institutionalism, which seeks to understand how organizations perceive and interpret institutional demands and how these interpretations, in turn, influence organizational action in their daily life (Boxenbaum & Strandgaard Pedersen, 2009; Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008). Based on the translation perspective (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996), the theoretical framework of this article assumes that institutional de-

mands transport underlying ideas about appropriate organizational responses that are translated as they travel from one local context to another. During travel, these ideas are subject to modifications, which result in local variations of the idea and, thus, an increased heterogeneity in organizational fields (Wæraas & Sataøen, 2014). By referring to literature on sense-making (Weick, 1979), this perspective emphasizes the position of actors as “interpreters of institutional pressure and hence as mediators of the institutional pressures on organizations” (Boxenbaum & Strandgaard Pedersen, 2009, p. 190). Thus, the translation literature opposes the classical neo-institutional assumption that organizational actors are passive recipients who adopt the “the same thing for the same reason” (Mueller & Whittle, 2011, p. 3), and instead acknowledges that actors modify ideas through a process of transformation to fit the unique needs of their organizational context.

In addition, the translation perspective provides a link between the macro level of organizations’ environment and the organizational level of HE. On the macro level, widening participation can be conceptualized “as a story of ideas turning into actions in ever new localities” (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996, p. 13). Accordingly, this idea travels around the organizational environment and is materialized by several means and actors. Since political actors play the most influential role within the publicly funded German HE system (Schimank, 2009), special attention needs to be paid to the political discourse surrounding the widening participation policy agenda (Archer, 2007; Boch Waldorff, 2013).

### 2.2. Discourses and Legitimizing Strategies

Previous research has revealed that widening participation represents a complex concept loaded with inconsistent normative values, rationales, and expectations within political discourses (Kehm, 2000). For example, research from the Australian context shows how political ideologies frame the discussion about social inclusion and its respective measures (Gidley, Hampson, Wheeler, & Bereded-Samuel, 2010). In the UK, it has been criticized that diversity rhetoric is employed in the discussion on widening participation, giving the discourse symbolic power based on notions of equity, resulting in a “moral discourse that silences other competing accounts” (Archer, 2007, p. 635). Also in the European context, Davies (2003) demonstrated how different narratives have been enacted within the widening participation discourse related to topics of social equity, while the chosen instruments of reform initiatives have in fact been more driven by economic imperatives than social equity rationales.

Drawing upon previous work on the “new rhetoric”, we focus on explicitly political or interest-laden discourses constructed by political actors (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005). Based on the assumption that discourses “originate from actors producing texts, while si-

multaneously giving these actions meaning, thereby constituting the social world” (Boch Waldorff, 2013, p. 286), we conclude that discourses entail patterns of interests, goals, and shared assumptions that can be identified via institutional vocabularies that are used to express a particular means of interpreting reality (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005, p. 43). Institutional vocabularies are readily utilized in the context of soft regulation instruments, which include policies that are open for (local) interpretation. On the one hand, this leaves a relatively large scope for actions on the side of HE institutions, as they can choose their own priorities and highlight certain aspects over others. On the other hand, the vague definition also produces uncertainty because organizations are required to position themselves and legitimize their actions against the background of this policy demand. Therefore, these soft regulation instruments provide an opportunity for valuable insights into the way HE institutions legitimize their practices (Boch Waldorff, 2013), while the policy analysis serves as a frame of reference for the analysis of organizational responses.

To analyze organizational responses to the demand of widening participation, the theoretical framework of this study builds on research on legitimizing strategies, which are used by organizational actors to justify their positions within the public discourse (Boch Waldorff, 2013; Vaara & Tienari, 2008; van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999). The strategy of *normalization* consists of arguments that refer to what is regarded as a normal function or behavior, for example, by linking recent organizational measures to similar occurrences in the past or future. *Authorization* is a strategy that refers to requirements on the side of institutionalized authorities in terms of laws or regulations. *Rationalization* is in use when organizational measures are legitimized by referring to expected benefits, purposes, functions, or outcomes, thereby displaying a means-ends rationale. *Moralization* refers to argumentations that are based on moral and ideological grounds by emphasizing specific values that are regarded as important for the organization. *Narrativization* involves the creation of a narrative structure of time and agency to dramatize concrete events. Based on storytelling, evidence of acceptable and preferential behavior is created.

These five strategies are used to create legitimate meaning by constructing local variations of the idea of widening participation through a process of translation (Boch Waldorff, 2013). Thus, instead of yielding a passive response, organizational actors participate in the process of establishing legitimacy (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008). Further, the local interpretations result in a variety of organizational practices (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005). This perspective is of particular interest for research on HE organizations as they are regarded as information- and sense-processing systems, in which images of policies are selectively reflected and communicated in a way that suits the respective local context (Krücken, Kosmützky, & Torka, 2006).

### 3. Methodology

The research design combines a document analysis of the political discourse on widening participation with a multiple case study that examines the organizational responses of selected universities in depth. The document analysis guided by the first research question draws on policy documents, statements, and program descriptions from central political actors. This includes the Federal Ministry of Education, the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Culture Affairs, and the German Science Council, who all produce the political discourse on widening participation by means of funding programs, decisions, and recommendations. In total, 40 documents were collected and analyzed thematically (Schreier, 2014), supported by the QDA software MAXQDA. The coding of the data was informed by a literature review on policy implementation and widening participation research in the international and German context.

Regarding the second research question, organizational responses were analyzed within a qualitative case study design. Building on the previous document analysis, we selected one funding program as an example for the external demand of widening participation, namely the Quality Pact for Teaching Program, due to three reasons. First, this nation-wide program resembles one of the most extensive programs in terms of financing and outreach, with a total funding volume of two billion euro subsidizing 253 projects at 186 HE organizations in the first funding period (2011–2016; BMBF, 2017). Second, this program aims to contribute to a more general improvement of the quality of teaching and learning, while simultaneously supporting initiatives that focus on the first year of study programs to “acknowledge the heterogeneous student composition” (BMBF, 2010, p. 2). This open character provides HE organizations with a high degree of autonomy in choosing to what extent they connect their initiatives with the topic of widening participation. Third, selecting this example allows us to analyze initiatives within regular bachelor and master study programs in order to examine how the traditional activities of teaching and learning are affected by widening participation.

To examine variations in organizational responses of HE organizations, the multiple case study design includes a diverse set of cases. While the selected universities are all funded within the Quality Pact for Teaching Program, they differ according to type of institution (university or university of applied science), location (metropolitan/periphery), and institutional profile (research-oriented, teaching-oriented, or regional-oriented). The final set of three cases consists of one university located in a metropolitan region characterized by a research orientation (HSA), one university located in a peripheral region with a regional orientation (HSB), and one university of applied science located in a metropolitan region with a teaching orientation (HSC). Although

case studies are not representative, the comparison of these cases allows for exploring how HE organizations translate the idea of widening participation and use legitimizing strategies that are highly context-sensitive.

Data sources include publicly accessible documents concerning widening participation, such as mission statements, project presentations, and annual reports of the three HE organizations. Data were further complemented by six semi-structured interviews with organizational actors, including HE administrators and project assistants involved in the process of conceptualization, implementation, and coordination of widening participation projects at the respective HE organizations. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim, while the data was again analyzed thematically. A coding frame (Schreier, 2014) was developed by combining inductive and deductive coding, informed by previous studies about discursive legitimizing strategies. For the purpose of anonymization and transparency, we choose acronyms indicating the type of data material and data source. Document data are abbreviated by 'doc', interview data are abbreviated by 'int'. Documents are numbered consecutively; interviews with HE administrators are abbreviated as 'intA', interviews with project assistants are abbreviated as 'intB'. Data materials from the three HE organizations are anonymized by referring to them as HSA, HSB, or HSC respectively. Following this coding logic, we distinguish between data sources including documents from main political actors (referring to the number of cited document and line, e. g., doc\_20/12), documents from the three HE organizations (e. g., HSB\_doc\_4/2), and interview materials from the three HE organizations (e. g., HSC\_intA/45).

#### **4. Discourses and Institutional Responses to Widening Participation**

##### *4.1. The Political Discourse on Widening Participation*

The analysis of policy documents revealed that the political discourse on widening participation in Germany is dominated by two different perspectives, the social justice perspective and the economic perspective. Although they are often intertwined, the two perspectives differ in their definition of the main objectives and underlying rationales associated with widening participation.

On the one hand, the key problem is seen in the underrepresentation of certain social groups in German HE organizations due to structural and financial barriers. From this perspective, political actors such as the Federal Ministry of Education refer to aims like "increasing the educational opportunities of all citizens" (doc\_40/711). Accordingly, the main institutional vocabularies are "educational equality", "equal opportunity" and "equity of chances". The underlying rationale of widening participation is defined in terms of social justice, as it is supposed to foster greater social equality through the inclusion of traditionally underrepresented social groups in HE.

These groups are mostly defined in socio-demographic terms with a special emphasis on gender, socioeconomic status, and migration background. Furthermore, some documents refer to students with care-giving tasks or students with disabilities or health issues. As this definition of target groups implies that the main reason for the underrepresentation lies within financial and structural barriers, the respective policies focus on investment in scholarships, social HE infrastructure, and student financial assistance, regarding the latter as "the central state instrument to secure equity of chances in education" (doc\_54/1728). For HE institutions, the policy aims to improve study conditions and provide more flexible learning and teaching practices that "acknowledge the increasingly heterogeneous learning needs of different student groups" (doc\_40/1187). Accordingly, special support structures are highlighted, like child care services, learning material for students with disabilities, blended-learning concepts, or dual study programs for students who work during the course of their studies. The underlying rationale is that there are structural barriers anchored within society, while HE organizations have the social responsibility to contribute to removing these structural obstacles. Thus, HE organizations are regarded as promoters of educational equality with the high external expectation that they are able to ensure "equal participation in education with regard to access, progress and successful completion of studies" (doc\_40/30).

On the other hand, the policy documents relate widening participation to demographic change and a shortage of skilled labor, which threatens the country's economic competitiveness. Therefore, widening participation is associated with the aim of "sustaining the demand for a skilled labor force" (doc\_13/6) to "strengthen the international competitiveness of Germany as a location for science" (doc\_6/23). Regarding institutional vocabularies, the policy documents refer extensively to "demographic change", the "need for skilled labor", and the current "lack of skilled labor". The rhetoric used in the documents tends to create an atmosphere of pressure and urgency for action. The solution is seen in increasing the attractiveness of HE and, consequently, the number of students and (successful) graduates. Thus, by "exploiting the existing pool of talent and knowledge" (doc\_54/1293), widening participation is displayed as a means of raising individual and collective wealth and thereby improving economic performance. Instead of highlighting the impact of structural barriers, this perspective assumes that everyone has the same opportunities if only willing to demonstrate high performance. This economic-oriented rationale focuses mainly on one target group, namely, vocationally qualified persons. The suggested measures concentrate on improving the permeability between vocational and academic education and the possibilities for lifelong learning. The main regulative obstacle for this target group was abolished with the political decision of the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Culture Affairs in 2009 that al-

lows access to HE for vocationally qualified persons without having formal HE entrance qualifications. To increase the numbers of students coming from this group, this political decision was complemented by several funding programs to help HE institutions improve the attractiveness of their study programs by developing more flexible study structures and instruments for the recognition of prior vocational learning. According to this perspective, HE institutions are expected to fulfill their role as providers of professionals for the economy by operating as drivers of innovation and answering the growing demand for a skilled labor force, both of which are needed to strengthen the national economy.

While the document analysis allowed two dominant functional claims to be identified, it also showed that support for equal access and the supply of a skilled labor force are emphasized in the policy documents to a different extent. Often, they are even intertwined, as illustrated by the following example:

We can only overcome the challenges of the demographic change and an imminent shortage of skilled labor by relying also in the future on good education for all and supporting all people in our country in the development of their potentials. This is why the improvement of educational equality was and will be a central aim of our work. (doc\_21/968)

Both perspectives postulate similar organizational measures to widen participation, but they differ in ascribing meaning to how HE organizations contribute to widening participation due to a different underlying rationale about the key problem and respective solution. According to the social justice rationale, the problem lies within structural barriers that hinder certain social groups from beginning and/or finishing their studies. Inequalities can thus be diminished by removing these barriers. According to the economic rationale, in turn, the not yet fully exhausted potential of talent among vocationally qualified persons is regarded as the key problem. Inequalities can only be reduced by encouraging potential students to participate in HE. The distinction between these two rationales is often blurred though, as illustrated by the above quote. Additionally, both perspectives postulate organizational actions regarding widening participation in a rather vague way. As a wide range of possible measures are listed in the policy documents, HE institutions are left without clear guidelines about what actions are required to support widening participation.

#### *4.2. Discursive Legitimizing Strategies in the Context of Widening Participation*

The three case studies reveal how HE organizations translate the idea of widening participation into their local understanding of their (societal) functions. Thereby, organizational actors make use of three strategies to legitimize organizational responses to the demands of widen-

ing participation, including rationalization, moralization, and profiliation. The specific context of HE organization has led to some adjustments in the definitions of the strategies of rationalization and moralization in comparison to the original definitions included in our theoretical framework. Further, based on expert interviews and document analysis, we identified a third strategy that has not been defined before. The following section illustrates how these strategies are used in the specific contexts of our three case studies.

##### *4.2.1. Rationalization*

According to the first strategy, widening participation is perceived as an already existing condition due to a heterogeneous student body that requires a rethinking of institutional learning and teaching practices. Organizational actors use rationalization as they legitimize organizational responses based on evidence derived from empirical findings or observations based on common knowledge, as indicated in the following quote from an expert interview:

This is of course not a scientifically valid and representative picture. This perception just relies on saying that we now have a different student population when 40 or 50 percent of an age cohort are studying in comparison to the time when I began to study...where...15 percent of one age cohort went to university. This, of course, has consequences....It does not always mean that the people are less able or, not to say, more stupid. But it is obvious that we now have a broader range of students, where old procedures do not work any longer. This is just a fact that results from the mass university. (HSA\_intA/36)

In this quote, the speaker emphasizes the changing student population due to increasing participation rates that are assumed to result in widening participation in HE. The quote associates widening participation with more students entering HE who possess heterogeneous or insufficient qualifications. Without defining a special target group, the consequences of this new situation are presented as a general challenge: organizational managers mention “hot spots in the faculties and cross-faculty red threats that have shown up everywhere” (HSC\_intA/11). This creates an urgent atmosphere that signals a need for action. By legitimizing this action on empirical grounds, there seems no further need for discussion since the facts already dictate what the logical next steps should be. Accordingly, rationalization strategies are used for framing widening participation as a challenge for HE organizations. Insufficient knowledge or academic competences of students entering HE are identified as the main problem. Therefore, the HE organizations in our case study implement diagnostic instruments and bridging courses that are perceived as the solution to “compensate for disparities in educational requirements”

(HSB\_doc\_3/5). The aim of these measures is “to improve the study success and reduce the drop-out rates of students with respective needs” (HSB\_doc\_3/13).

We identified rationalization as a strategy in all three case studies, while they are mostly activated by organizational actors at the management level. Further, there is evidence for inner-institutional differences, as rationalization strategies appear more common for the context of widening participation initiatives in the natural sciences than humanities.

#### 4.2.2. Moralization

The second strategy refers to widening participation as a moral responsibility that all universities must prevent discrimination and unfair treatment of students from different backgrounds. This strategy of moralization is mostly associated with describing a “vision for the university” that is “diverse, international, gender-responsive, family-friendly and non-discriminatory”, while promoting a “culture of diversity” (HSA\_doc8/3). Statements including moralization strategies are often found in the context of diversity management activities like diversity audits:

The University acknowledges the diversity of its students and staff and advocates establishing equal opportunities and eliminating discrimination. Diversity and individuality are regarded as sources of enrichment for the whole university. (HSA\_doc\_8/3)

As this quote demonstrates, moralization strategies are characterized by a perspective on widening participation that regards it as a positive resource for HE institutions. They bring forward a strong normative argument for measures to prevent discrimination and support equal treatment, while serving as a moral compass displaying how the respective HE organization should position itself toward widening participation.

The main target groups in this context are defined by gender, migration background, and students with disabilities and/or chronic diseases. Measures for the latter group mostly involve access to university facilities and personal consultation services aiming to make the institution “a university for all” (HSB\_doc\_11/1). Measures for female students are mostly based on the legal requirements of equality directives and include career services or support for the balance between studies and work or family life. Other measures include mentoring programs for female students or students with migration background, especially in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM), where these groups are especially underrepresented. These mentoring programs are legitimized against the background of the self-prescribed conception as an inclusive and intercultural university. In this line, moralization strategies underlie an understanding of widening participation as the inclusion of certain social groups that are still underrepresented and potential victims of discrimination. Therefore, widening partic-

ipation measures should focus on supporting these special groups and increasing their visibility. In the context of moralization, this means that the legitimization of actions for widening participation are based on the assumption that it represents a goal that still needs to be improved and not, as compared to rationalization, in which it is stated as a fact that the increase in student numbers has already resulted in a wider inclusion of previously underrepresented social groups.

We found evidence for moralization strategies in all three case studies as well, but again with inner-institutional differences: moralization strategies are more characteristic for the perspective of representatives from special central departments that are responsible for issues of diversity management and equal opportunities regulations.

#### 4.2.3. Profilization

The third strategy, called profilization, includes references to the institutional profile to link the topic of widening participation more closely to the local context. In this sense, addressing widening participation becomes a narrative, in which organizational actors align their interpretation of widening participation with the specific profile of their HE institution.

On the one hand, this can mean that the traditional relevance of widening participation for a university is attributed to its specific historical background, like the example of the regional-oriented university (HSB) shows:

The University was founded as a reformed university. In this tradition of educational responsibility, we attribute special importance to the recruitment of a broad spectrum of first-year students and to avoiding early selection mechanisms. This results in an above-average heterogeneity of the students: more than a quarter of the students come with the admission requirements of a Fachhochschulreife or a completed vocational training, the students of the university are on average older, they work more intensively during their studies, and are more likely to have children already. While nationally, one third of students come from a so-called non-academic background, in our university, it is almost half of the students. Thus, the university is particularly successful in opening up perspectives for social advancement. (HSB\_doc\_12/6)

As indicated in the above quote, widening participation is related to the historical foundations of HSB as a reformed university. The respective student population is defined as non-traditional, as it differs from the average student population in terms of entrance qualifications, age, living situation, and academic background. This is accompanied by a wide range of different measures that are not only directed at easing access, but also at the (successful) participation of these student groups. In this HE institution, widening participation serves as a social ladder

for socially underrepresented groups, which is a clearly stated part of this university's identity.

Similarly, the teaching-oriented university of applied science (HSC) uses widening participation initiatives to enhance their institutional profile, while their organizational responses are legitimized in the context of how widening participation initiatives fit the mission statement of the university: their teaching orientation is taken as an argument to explain why their widening participation initiatives are characterized by a focus on improving the quality of teaching within the regular study programs and not so much on providing additional support courses for certain target groups. This approach is accompanied by a broad definition of student diversity, assuming that "we need teaching and learning approaches that acknowledge different learning types and personalities" (HSC\_intA/36).

On the other hand, profilization strategies are also applied when universities struggle with multiple institutional demands that they perceive as incompatible. This is exhibited by the following quote from a manager from the research-oriented university (HSA), where the external demand of widening participation is regarded as conflicting with the university's pursuit of excellence:

If we go on with this focus on what students lack and need, we support a strong deficit perspective. With regard to reputation, this is not bearable. Then it will always be said: the [project initiative] is a repair shop. Only a repair shop. And other universities will ask: "Don't you have something excellent to offer?" (HSA\_intA/44)

This quote shows how the university defines widening participation as supporting students with insufficient academic competences. This interpretation results in judging widening participation as a potential threat to excellence. Thus, widening participation initiatives are seen as problematic, since they conflict with excellence and the strong research orientation of this university.

As demonstrated above, we found profilization strategies in all three case studies, while the local interpretations led to very different meanings and organizational actions.

## 5. Conclusion

The findings of the policy documents indicate that the widening participation policy discourse contains two dominant perspectives, perceiving widening participation either as a means to improve social justice or to secure a pool of skilled labor. Consequently, the mechanisms behind the policies seeking to reduce inequalities differ, as they either recommend measures to remove structural barriers that hinder the participation of certain social groups or emphasize that individual student potential needs to be activated. While the first mechanism is influenced by an emphasis on equality of opportunities,

which can only be achieved by compensating the consequences of structural injustice, the latter mechanism is clearly influenced by meritocratic principle, which states that social mobility is solely based on one's individual achievement, rather than socioeconomic determinants.

The presented case studies of HE organizations further reveal how legitimizing strategies are used by universities to position themselves within the policy discourse. These strategies can be related to the two perspectives on widening participation. First, rationalization strategies are characterized by a close coupling of means and ends while locating the main problem on the side of the individual student whose academic performance needs improvement. This is in line with the economic perspective on widening participation that is characterized by a deficit-oriented logic that tends to stereotype certain student groups as in need of special support to enable their future participation in the labor market and, thus, contribute to economic prosperity.

Second, moralization strategies emphasize the social responsibility of HE institutions to contribute to widening access to HE for underrepresented groups. This is consistent with the social justice perspective on widening participation, sharing a logic that perceives socio-culturally rooted structural barriers as the main impediments of the participation of underrepresented groups in HE according to socio-demographic characteristics and, thus, for the reproduction of social inequalities. Here, HE organizations differ in the way how they understand widening participation either as a fact in the sense that student population is perceived as already heterogeneous or as a goal that still needs to be fulfilled. However, differences in perceptions do not only exist between institutions, but even more within the institutions between departments and faculties. Here, further research is needed to examine these inner-institutional differences in more detail.

Third, since profilization strategies are used to connect their interpretation of widening participation to the local context, both perspectives can be found, depending on the institutional profile. This can include, on the one hand, highlighting a university's historical role as a social ladder for certain underrepresented groups, representing the social justice perspective. On the other hand, defining widening participation as a threat to excellence reflects the deficit-oriented perspective of the economic rationale. This finding is in particular interesting in the light of the dilemma that research-oriented universities tend to have the greatest inequalities in terms of the social profiles of their students and the global trend towards greater inter-institutional differences in facilitating access (Archer, 2007).

This study contributes to research on social inequalities in HE in several ways. First, our findings from the analysis of the policy discourse within the German context support previous studies from other countries on how the widening participation discourse is dominated by economic as well as social justice imperatives (Archer, 2007; Davies, 2003) and how initiatives for widening ac-



cess to HE are influenced by different underlying norms (Goastellec, 2008). However, these studies focus mostly on the changing practices of admission procedures at the macro level of national policies (Clancy & Goastellec, 2007). We argue that access, participation and success can be regarded as different “degrees of social inclusion” (Gidley et al., 2010), in which access represents only the first step. This study broadens the scope by looking not only at changes in access criteria, but also how HE institutions support widening participation and academic success for various student groups in a more holistic way.

Second, our study calls for more qualitative-oriented research designs that comprise not only the macro level of national policies, but also consider institutional differences at the organizational level, in order to capture the different meanings given to widening participation. Such a methodological approach is in particular useful in the context of soft steering instruments due to their non-binding character, which leaves a large scope for actions for HE institutions. Due to their widespread application in the field of German HE and the increasing amount of financial resources they entail, future research on the role of soft steering instruments is crucial.

Third, our study shows how the translation perspective provides a useful explanatory tool for analyzing both the macro level of national policies and the organizational level of HE institutions. Our findings suggest that the translation process of the “travelling idea” of widening participation was guided by underlying rationales that build a frame of reference for how HE institutions should respond to this demand. Whether these more general rationales are enacted, however, depends on the prevalent assumptions and beliefs embedded in the local context.

Fourth, this study illustrates how the concept of legitimizing strategies can be applied in the context of (German) HE institutions. To date, this concept has been examined in other contexts, like multinational corporations (Vaara & Tienari, 2008), healthcare centers (Boch Waldorff, 2013), immigration control (van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999), and accounting and law (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005). In this way, this study illustrates how a transfer of this concept is possible, but we also saw the necessity to modify the definitions of the strategies to take the specific context of widening participation and (German) HE institutions into account. The newly identified strategy profilization is of special interest, since it adds to the general discussion on the role of agency in influencing institutions, by portraying organizational actors neither as passive recipients of political demands, nor as institutional entrepreneurs who purposely manipulate institutional arrangements (Lawrence et al., 2009). Instead our findings call for an alternative approach in which organizational actors’ interpretations of political demands are always embedded within an institutionally defined context.

However, because HE institutions differ in their structural and cultural characteristics, future research is

needed to verify our findings in other (German) HE institutions, while also accounting for the influence of other institutional characteristics besides the type of institution, location, and institutional profile. Further, for a more complete picture of translation processes, future studies should acknowledge that within the current discourse political actors represent only one of many stakeholder groups that influence the discussion about widening participation. For example, analyses of media representations might provide additional insights about how the topic is discussed among HE scholars, practitioners, representatives of economy, but also parents and students.

### Acknowledgements

We thank the anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments. Further, we acknowledge financial support by Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft and Technische Universität Dortmund/TU Dortmund Technical University within the funding program Open Access Publishing. Finally, the data was obtained within the research project StuFHe at the University of Hamburg funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF; grant no. 01PB14005). Any opinions expressed here are those of the authors.

### Conflicts of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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