

The Impact of Examination Modalities and Higher Education Structures on Individual Study Paths – A Survey Experiment

Context

Due to the high demand for academically qualified personnel, ensuring academic success is of social and economic importance. In this context, the effect of institutional regulations of study and examination organizations on study behaviour is surprisingly unexplored, despite new institutionalism being a major paradigm in sociological research.

We present the structure of a survey experiment aiming to gain insights into the mechanisms about which degree of obligation in examination modalities encourages study success and which hinders it.

Theoretical model

Three dimensions determine the extent to which examination regulations are binding (see Figure 1):

- (1) Number of examination attempts
- (2) Exam registration modalities, and
- (3) Exam de-registration modalities

The characteristics vary in terms of time, period and actor. A superordinate level of the model consists of rules for earning credit points, for example, a minimum number of credit points per semester. We assume that registration rules can exert a stronger binding effect than de-registration rules and that students perceive the number of attempts as the most difficult factor to bind them. Through the survey experiment, we would like to find out how strongly the students weight each dimension. In this way, the model can be tested and refined.

Figure 1: Model for the degree of bindingness of examinations

Degree to which examination rules are binding		Two	Three	Three + oral re-examination
Registration	De-registration			
	Medical certificate only			
	Deadline before exam			
Automatically by examination office	Not necessary			
	Medical certificate only			
	Deadline before exam			
By students at the beginning of semester	Not necessary			
	Medical certificate only			
	Deadline before exam			
By students at the end of semester	Not necessary			
	Medical certificate only			
	Deadline before exam			

Participants

We plan to conduct the survey using students from four different bachelor degrees at Leibniz University Hannover, Germany, and estimate the number of potential respondents at about 800 to 1,500 per degree (in total about 4,500) with an estimated return rate of 30%.

Figure 2: Trade-off screens

Screen 1) trade-offs (number of attempts vs. exam registration)

Variation 1A	Variation 1B
Two attempts	Three attempts plus oral re-examination
Manual registration at semester start	Automatic exam registration
Constant: De-registration in case of illness with medical certificate only	Constant: De-registration in case of illness with medical certificate only

Screen 2) trade-offs (number of attempts vs. exam registration)

Variation 2A	Variation 2B
Two attempts	Three attempts plus oral re-examination
Constant: Automatic exam registration	Constant: Automatic exam registration
De-registration possible up to three weeks before exam	De-registration in case of illness with medical certificate only

Screen 3) trade-offs (exam registration vs. de-registration)

Variation 3A	Variation 3B
Constant: Two attempts	Constant: Two attempts
Automatic exam registration	Manual registration at semester start
De-registration possible up to three weeks before exam	De-registration in case of illness with medical certificate only

Methods and procedure

The planned survey experiment is a mixture of vignette and discrete choice experiment. In three different scenarios, students at Leibniz University Hannover are to weigh up two trade-offs against each other, which contain characteristics from three dimensions relating to the binding nature of examination regulations. In each scenario, one of the three dimensions is kept constant, while the values of the other two vary (see Figure 2). Screen 1 therefore contains the trade-off between number of attempts and exam registration while keeping the exam de-registration modalities constant. Screen 2 contains the number of attempts vs. the exam de-registration while keeping the registration modalities constant. In Screen 3, the trade-off is registration vs. de-registration modalities, whereas for the number of attempts, the same value is given in both variations. The two values chosen for each dimension are intended to represent the contrasts between a standardization of examination rules and a freedom of choice in examination modalities.

The students surveyed evaluate the two trade-offs per screen by comparing them with each other regarding the effects of the two alternatives on their perceived performance pressure, on the pace of their studies and on their academic success. Afterwards, the students choose which of the two alternatives seems **more binding** to them. By carrying out a conjoint analysis, it will be possible to determine the weight of the indicators in the student perception of obligation and performance pressure. It will also capture the effects of each dimension on the study conditions and come closer to the students' definition of the term study success. The survey also contains further information on socio-demographic and study-related characteristics.

Project description

The study belongs to the BMBF-funded (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung) project "Bedeutung des institutionellen Kontextes von Studienabbruch und Langzeitstudium (BiK)", funding reference number: 01PX21006B, which consists of Leibniz University Hannover, the German Centre for Higher Education Research and Science Studies (DZHW) and the University of Mannheim/Mannheim Centre for European Social Research (MZES). The project seeks to investigate the effect of the study-related institutional context on student dropout, long-term study and study paths at the three levels of federal state, university and study programme.