

ENABLING LIVELIHOOD THROUGH GUIDANCE AND COUNSELLING IN UNIVERSITY LIFELONG LEARNING - THE IMPORTANT ROLE OF PROGRAM COORDINATORS USING THE EXAMPLE OF CONTINUING EDUCATION AT GERMAN UNIVERSITIES

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks into two interrelated hypotheses. The first presumption is that lifelong learning is an important contributor to, and even a precondition for, the livelihood of learners who have taken an unconventional educational path. Therefore, continuing education enables lifelong learning and program coordinators are an important mediator to enable continuing education through guidance and counselling. In this paper we want to showcase that program coordinators are the first and foremost focal point for students in continuing education to seek guidance and consultation. Coordinators have a variety of tasks to master, and guidance and counselling is one of the most important one. Program coordinators and students are working together through the entire student life cycle. In order to reinforce our hypotheses, the paper re-analysed data from two research projects to show how program coordinators support students in their professional and personal lives.

INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, University Lifelong Learning has been getting more and more attention in research, and continuing education programs have become more frequent in German universities (Bade-Becker 2017, 171). The implementation of these programs proves to be challenging for universities at all organizational levels (Seitter 2014, 141). The specifics of continuing education in Germany include defining non-traditional students¹ as a target group and the legal requirement of full-cost-calculation that results in demand orientation and a specific service orientation towards the (potential) students for example (*ibid.*; also Seitter 2017, 214). These specifics, which will be described later in this paper, require a structure in universities to support the overall program implementation. Decentralized program coordinators thereby play an important role (Gronert / Rundnagel 2018, 186).

This paper focuses on non-traditional students and emphasizes the role and function of program coordinators in continuing education programs. Program coordinators are essential in their role as intermediary actors. One of their central tasks is providing guidance and counselling to students. Program coordinators accompany students at every step of their educational formation. Because program coordinators are the first and foremost contact points, they are mostly confronted with the students' requirements and expectations. They can therefore be seen as an "One Stop Shop" (Hanft 2014, 116).

To test our hypotheses we reanalysed the data from the two research projects *Professionalization requirements of program coordinators* and *Counselling and Crediting*².

¹ Non-traditional students are students who do not take a linear path into university – e.g. they do not start university directly after high school graduation or do not complete it in the usual timeframe. They usually do not have the formal university entrance qualification and/or study part-time, participate in long-distance learning or take evening classes (Teichler/Wolter 2004, 72; also Schütze/Slowey 2002, 315)

² Both projects were part of a cross-university research and development project. For detailed information see www.wmhoch3.de

We took the data of 14 interviews with program coordinators and conducted a content-related analysis with a thematic focus on "guidance and counselling" using the student-life-cycle as an orientation.

Assuming that lifelong learning supports the livelihoods of non-traditional students, as lifelong learning is supposed to enhance participation in education, training and further education on all levels of the educational system and to limit the age-related differences and barriers (Wolter 2010, 55). We will argue in this paper that program coordinators enable lifelong learning in continuing education through guidance and counselling.

The first chapter of this paper describes the specifics of continuing education in Germany. The research methodology is laid out in chapter two. Building on these we will present the findings of the qualitative research projects to prove our hypotheses on guidance counselling as an important means for program coordinators to enable non-traditional students to take part and successfully complete courses in continuing education at university. In conclusion, this paper argues that program coordinators enable non-traditional students to take part in lifelong learning and therefore support their livelihood in general.

CONTINUING EDUCATION IN GERMAN UNIVERSITIES

Continuing education at German universities differs in several aspects from the traditional norm / understanding. While for traditional degrees academic self-governance and a certain supply orientation prevails (Kehm & Lanzendorf 2005, 52), continuing education is more demand-oriented and a managerial governance is more prominent (Wilkesmann 2010, 34). Contrary to the structure of universities that can be described as loosely-coupled with different levels of hierarchy (Kern 2000, 28), continuing education programs have a tightly-coupled structure. The implementation and communication at program-level have a strict hierarchy in which the program coordinator has an intermediary role (Gronert & Rundnagel 2018, 189, 196; Rundnagel 2018, 218) and serves as a central contact person, similar to a "one-stop-office" (Hanft 2014, 116).

An essential and very unusual feature of German universities - if you exclude non-traditional students - is the fact that all continuing education programs have to include a full-cost-calculation, i.e. all costs have to be calculated and generated through external funding, etc. (Seitter, 2014, 142). While traditional programs use a mixed calculation model / method with a very large part of the costs being paid by the government (Lermen & Vogt, 2018, 4), the continuing education programs have to finance themselves through tuition fees, grants or financial support, etc.

Undergraduate programs in German universities are free of charge and most of the enrolled students - most of them traditional students - start their studies directly after high school (Stöter 2013, 54f; Lewin, Vierthaler & Fraunhofer 2017, 160). Students targeted in university lifelong learning programs usually have an undergraduate degree or have completed a formation program in their field. They may already be working (sometimes for several years) in their job. They are often involved in family or care giving responsibilities, and have to pay tuition fees (Lewin, Vierthaler & Fraunhofer 2017, 160). These conditions lead to different needs and expectations both from students and universities.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To validate our hypotheses, we combined the data of two research projects. The project *Counselling and Crediting* aimed to identify counselling needs and structures for target groups in and out of the university. The goal was to develop a concept to sustainably establish organizational structures that focus on counselling. The aim of the project *Professionalization requirements of program coordinators* was to generate empirical findings on the practice of program coordinators. A special focus was on the profession's tasks, training and requirements. The two projects encompass in total 33 interviews with staff members and two focus group discussions with students from three universities. This gave us a versatile overview.

In order to focus on "guidance and counselling" 14 interviews from both projects were analyzed for a second time using the categories from the project *Counselling and Crediting*. This survey method determined typical counseling concerns of students before enrollment (orientation phase), after enrollment (study phase) and after graduation. The data analysis was content-related with a thematic focus using a category system that outlined text passages with similar content. The main and sub-categories were derived from the respective interview outlines. The expert interviews were analyzed with the help of the software MAXQDA according to the content analysis method by Mayring (2003). Both projects were also analyzed separately to get deeper insights into the scope of each project. A three-step process was chosen to relate the results of the two research projects to the underlying hypotheses:

- (1) In a first step, we created categories deviated from the major findings of the *Counseling and Crediting* project.
- (2) In a second step, the categories were used to re-analyse interviews with program coordinators. Thus, 14 interviews with 12 respondents were used.
- (3) The data analysis was carried out according to the same methodology as in the two initial projects with a focus on "guidance and counselling" in continuing education programs.

The procedure is visualized in figure one.

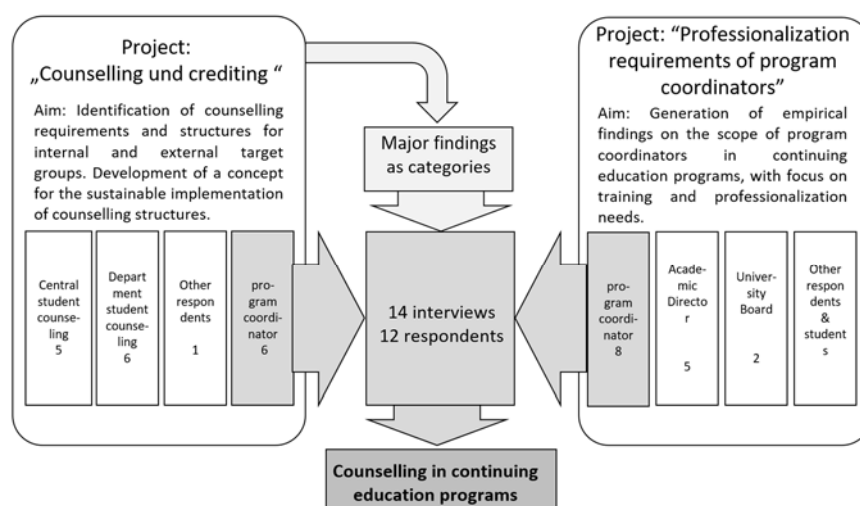


Figure 1 research design

The next chapter presents representative examples that were derived from the interviews with the program coordinators in continuing education programs. But first the next chapter gives a short introduction to the profession of program coordinators in general.

PROGRAM COORDINATORS – GUIDANCE AND COUNSELLING THROUGHOUT THE ENTIRE PROGRAM CYCLE

Program coordinators in decentrally-organized continuing education programs are essential in their role as intermediary actors. They have a variety of tasks: strategic management, marketing, financial management, admission and management of exams, quality management, lecturer support and management of internal and external partnerships (Gronert & Rundnagel 2018). A program coordinator points out: “I know the vita of all my students. We’ve discussed if they can successfully complete the program or not. I am with them through every academic and personal concern they have. I know their occupation, family status and problems. And I am the one handing out the certificates when they’ve finished. It is very different from working with traditional students.” (program coordinator 2, Abs.159). On the one hand this quote showcases the variety of tasks the program coordinator has, and on the other hand it shows how the program coordinator is involved in the students’ educational formation and personal life throughout the entire program cycle: from admission to graduation and beyond. In the figure below the main tasks of program coordinator are summarized and aligned to the steps of the student life cycle. This classification is merely for analytical purposes and emphasizes that guidance and counselling is an important task needed in every step of the student life cycle.

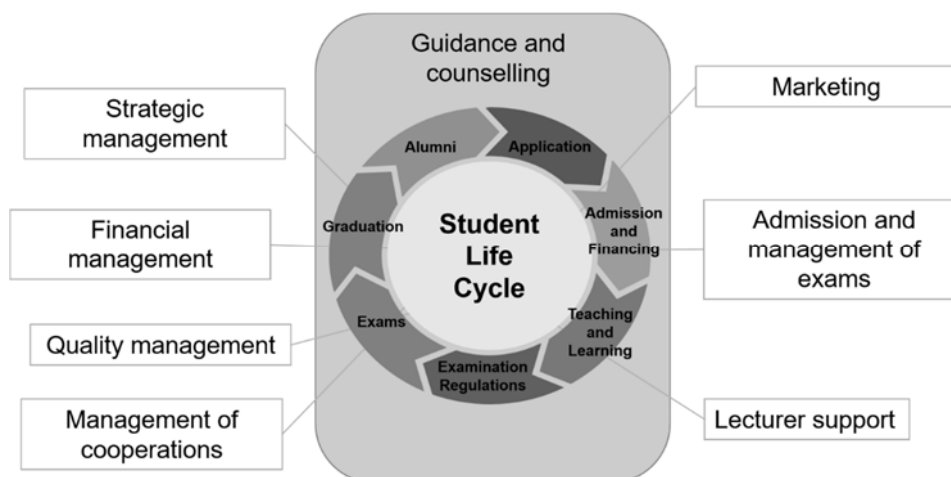


Figure 2 Tasks in student life cycle

To align our hypotheses with our findings we developed an overview of all identified concerns and requests presented by students which program coordinators mentioned in the interviews. To illustrate these, we’ve chosen four examples: admissions/financing, exams/exam regulations, graduation and alumni, which we will discuss in greater detail in this paper.

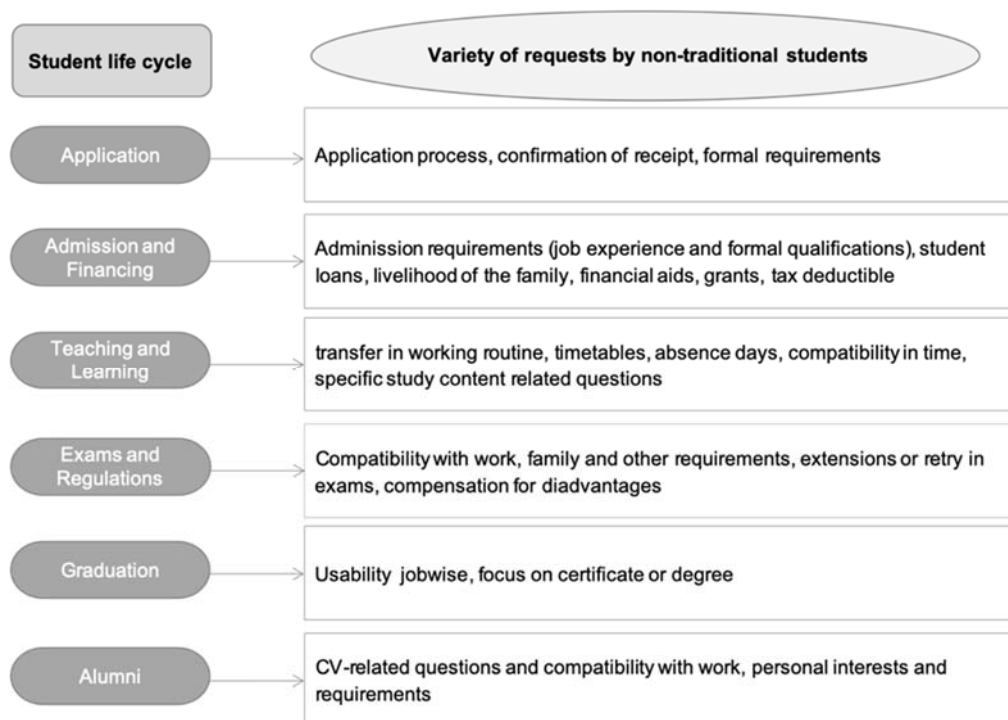


Figure 3 non-traditional student requirements

Admissions / Financing

Even before enrolling in a study program, guidance and counselling is very important. This is illustrated in the following quotation: “How long does the course take? Am I [the student] qualified to apply for the course and how onerous is the application process? These are basic questions; typical frequently asked questions we [the program coordinators] are faced with” (program coordinator 3, passage 53).

This shows that program coordinators must be able to provide individual and CV-related advice. They also assist the prospective students in making an important decision. For example, the students want to discuss how the course is structured so that it can be combined with family and / or occupational responsibilities, or what effect the decision might have on their partnerships and family lives.

At the same time program coordinators have to keep in mind the formal procedures of admission requirements and processes. In particular, the question of financing is of great importance. The interested students need advice on the question of “how they can finance their courses or if there are possibilities of assistance or sponsorship?” (ibid. program coordinator 4, Abs. 23). In addition to CV-related aspects, the program coordinators must also give advice on sensitive issues of funding for continuing education, like paying in instalments or if the student can afford the fees in general. Overall, there is already a high need for advice during the orientation phase which is very diverse and ranges from questions of formal processes to highly individual concerns of compatibility of the program with work and family.

Exams / Exam Regulations

During the study phase program coordinators must reconcile the expectations and needs of the student with the requirements for examinations and the course in general:

Of course the students will call and tell me that there is too much work to be done, for example at home or at work, or the children are sick and they can't finish the term paper on time. So, I can't just tell them that there is a deadline which they have to meet. My job is it to provide a service, to find a way within the framework of exam regulations through which they can hand it in later. It is my job to provide that service or to support the student in any other way. The important part is that we have to find a way to work within the exam regulations on the one hand and consider the needs and requirements of the student on the other hand".

Program coordinator 1, passage 84

Even if the program coordinator is mainly talking about exams and exam regulations, the focus is on the entire learning process and especially "creating the perfect environment to learn ..." (*ibid.*). It shows the arrangements the program coordinator has to make in order to meet the student's needs. In this quotation it is evident how the coordinator has to juggle the student's expectations and needs, and the exam and course regulations. A distinct service orientation becomes clear.

Graduation

The program coordinator is also involved in issuing certificates. The coordinator works together with the registrar's office and hands out the certificates personally. While focusing the analysis on "guidance and counselling" it becomes clear that program coordinators also give advice to students who are concerned with their future professional careers, as illustrated in this example: "The second question is, in what way will the course enhance my job opportunities? How does the course content match my professional qualifications? What benefits do I gain from taking part in the course?" (program coordinator 5, Abs. 13). One reason why students engage in continuing education programs is to achieve advancement in their current jobs or to be in a position to change jobs. The program coordinator is also providing advice on this matter. He or she has to be familiar with one or several professional fields. The certificate the students receive in the end enables them to get a promotion or change jobs.

Development after the course / alumni

Even after graduation and "handing out the certificates" the program coordinator stays in touch with the alumni. He or she stores the contacts in a database and contacts the students afterwards in order to talk about personal or occupational developments: "and they are happy when I call and ask how it all worked out in the end. Today for example I contacted an alumnus and asked if he got the job he wanted. He was very happy that I stayed in touch and that the university took an interest in his whereabouts" (program coordinator 1, Abs. 139).

On the one hand, this contact helps the program coordinator to improve the counselling provided regarding job or field-related topics, in that that he or she can use the information from this student feedback to give better advice to future students and to make a program more attractive due to the documented successes of its alumni. And on the other hand, it builds on the existing student-university relationship that can contribute to improving quality management or cooperation management purposes. It helps the program to develop further and be more effective for other students.

Discussion

This paper demonstrates that program coordinators enable lifelong learning in continuing education by providing guidance and counselling throughout the entire program cycle and beyond. The examples given prove that non-traditional students in continuing education programs have different needs and requirements which are addressed by the program coordinator through guidance and counselling. This article showcases that program

coordinators – in their function as a "one-stop-office" – are the main focal points for non-traditional students to raise their concerns and seek advice.

Program coordinators therefore are an important cornerstone that enable non-traditional students to engage in and successfully complete courses and programs in continuing education. Within the scope of this study we could verify our hypothesis that program coordinators enable lifelong learning in university continuing education.

Furthermore, it would be interesting to apply our findings to other fields or institutions in adult education in order to see if our hypotheses prove to be true under different conditions and different requirements. These findings can support the professionalization of program coordinators, as they illustrate the need for professional guidance and counselling skills. This task is one of the most important ones, but is also one with a great variety of sub-tasks. This leads to the conclusion that program coordinators have to be trained in all of the aforementioned tasks but especially in providing guidance and counselling with regard to the needs of non-traditional students. This paper might be a first step in this direction.

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