

## **Call for Papers for the 17th Annual Conference of the Society for Research on Higher Education (Gesellschaft für Hochschulforschung, GfHf) in Vienna from 14-16 September 2022**

### **New times – old strategies?**

#### **Changes in demand for studies, students' needs and requirements for graduates**

From school through university to the labour market. Although many different paths into and through higher education have evolved over time, higher education is still often seen as a linear process by a wide range of stakeholders. The image of studying and working as successive phases of life has long ceased to represent students' realities; much rather, employment increasingly takes place before taking up studies, during the course of study and between several stages of studying. And: Not all graduates strive to utilize their degree professionally.

In the face of climate change, digitalisation and an increasingly rapid succession of crises, it is becoming increasingly uncertain how the future world of work will be shaped and what skills will be required in the future. Hence, the pressure on universities to improve the employability of their graduates intensifies. In which ways is the demand of different groups for a university degree and, above all, for the contents of their studies affected by this rising uncertainty? Does it also change the sequence of learning and working phases? How are universities reacting to this uncertainty? Are they changing the study courses they offer (key words: modularisation, flexibilisation, dual studies, or part-time studies) and/or the content of their studies (e.g. more generic skills)?

In this field of tension, Orr et al. (2019) have outlined four different (ideal-typical) scenarios for future learning paths in the higher education system: a) extensive studies at the beginning of the learning path, b) compact studies that are extended by shorter study blocks later in life, c) studies consisting of individually combined modules, and d) studies that are only started after an initial period of employment. It is not unlikely that all these scenarios will develop at the same time and that there will be further differentiated offers for the different needs of diverse groups of students. This may, for example, include offers with a focus on the major social challenges and on the interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary competences needed to deal with them.

In this context, an important role is also played by the socio-demographic and geographic composition of the student population, which is slowly but steadily changing. Main causes for this development can be found in the opening of higher education institutions to new groups (including those without a traditional higher education entrance qualification), increased recognition of professional experience, increased internationalisation, as well as a delayed entry to university in the sense of life-long learning. However, it is also evident that different groups of students choose different types of higher education institutions and fields of study. Social factors such as parental educational background, resources such as (mental and physical) health, financial resources, housing and family situation, as well as gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and age have an impact on study choice and student success and thus continue to play a significant role in the higher education context. The higher education system, which – on an aggregated level – appears to be more egalitarian than in the past, is in fact composed of (in part strongly) segregated elements: For example, in some disciplines women, and in others men, are strongly overrepresented, but overall the gender ratio is relatively balanced. Higher education institutions are expected to promote the diversity of their student population and to develop appropriate support services for diverse groups of students. This can be done inclusively across the university's entire range of studies or through

specialised services that are demanded by specific groups. Some of these services have existed for a long time (e.g. Distance-Learning University in Hagen), others have only recently emerged (focus on dual studies, first in family students, English-language studies for internationals, but also offers that implicitly address students with high SES, part-time studies).

Experiences with and the impact of the Covid19 pandemic are heterogeneous. First and foremost, the pandemic initiated a "boost of digitalisation", which also had an impact on the nature of learning, teaching, and testing as well as on social interactions. Initial results indicate that – at least in Austria – there were also significant shifts in the demand for studies.

Which of the described processes of change can be observed empirically, which ones are rather temporary hypes, and which ones are likely to last?

- Do the demand patterns of prospective students for different study contents or organisational structures of studying change and/or do some of the learning phases shift to later stages in the course of life?
- If it is to be expected that the labour market will demand different skills and competencies in the medium-term than it does in the short-term, how could or should curricula and study contents be changed (e.g. more inter-/ transdisciplinary studies, more generic skills)? To what extent could or should such changes be decoupled from usability in the labour market (e.g. usability for science, science communication, preservation/improvement of democratic values)?
- If the knowledge imparted at university is no longer sufficient for a "whole working life", do universities expand their offers of postgraduate further education, are regular courses of study adapted accordingly, or does the (further) imparting of knowledge and competencies take place outside the universities?
- In Germany, more part-time study programmes have been created in recent years, but demand for these programmes remains low, especially at public universities. How can this be explained considering the high proportion of working students?
- Are transitions into university (especially not immediately after leaving school), between levels of study (Bachelor - Master - PhD), and into the labour market changing?
- Are motives for studying changing or are groups of students increasingly differentiated based on their motives for studying as well as their paths into and through a degree programme? What influence does vocational training or employment before or during higher education studies have on this?
- Is the demand for modularisation or flexibilisation increasing? Does this have different effects on different groups of students?
- How are universities responding to these changes? For example, by differentiating their support services for specific groups of students (study entry phase, outreach activities in schools, improved on-boarding at the beginning of studies, additional/voluntary courses to teach specific skills), by expanding (e.g. upstream *studium generale*, more inter-/ transdisciplinary studies) or further differentiating the study programmes? What is accepted (by whom?), which goals are (not) achieved?
- Which models are sustainable (both for the universities and the students)? Increased disciplinary orientation, more interdisciplinarity, or more liberal arts – or all at the same time, but different for each individual student? Or will other forms of organisation become more relevant? Are flexible modules (micro-credentials), possibly completed online and

globally at different universities, the solution or at least a solution for some – as strongly recommended by the EU (EC 2021)?<sup>1</sup>

**In short: How are the demands and needs of students and on the labour market changing? What does this mean in terms of innovative further development of the organisation and content of studies for universities, which are under pressure in the face of radical changes? What should be retained – possibly also against external resistance?**

These – exemplary – questions form the core of the Annual Conference of 2022, which will be presented and discussed in 2-3 tracks (one of them in English) and in plenary sessions. Impulses on the global challenges and examples of – also artistically driven – strategies will be contributed by the University of Applied Arts Vienna, especially at the beginning of the event.

As every year, there will also be an open track, in which current research results can be presented independently of the theme of the annual conference.

**Please send submissions** for empirical or theoretical presentations on the theme of the annual conference and the exemplary questions listed or for the open track in the form of abstracts (German or English) with a maximum of 700 words (references included) to [gfhf@ihs.ac.at](mailto:gfhf@ihs.ac.at) by **31.07.2022**.

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<sup>1</sup> European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, Andersen, T., Shapiro Futures, H., Nedergaard Larsen, K. (2021): *A European approach to micro-credentials : output of the micro-credentials higher education consultation group : final report*, Publications Office, 2021, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/30863>.