

Overcoming barriers to higher education entry in German nursing degree programs

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With the intent of improving quality of care and patient safety, the WHO recommends the academization of the nursing profession in general¹. For the same reason, most European countries offer bachelor programs in nursing². In Germany, nursing education encompasses a 3-year vocational training at EQF-Level 4, all the while meeting high quality standards. Nevertheless, adding nursing programs to college curricula would contribute to dealing with the challenges of demographic and epidemiological change. In Germany, the societal need for academically qualified nurses has also been emphasized by policy makers. The German Council of Science and Humanities (*Wissenschaftsrat*) for instance, has recommended academic education in ten to twenty percent of all nursing students.

In addition to training integrated undergraduate programs in nursing, extra occupational programs are being developed and implemented on college level in order to provide adequate practical instruction to nursing students. Nevertheless, nursing education in Germany remains, at least for now, a two-class system that allows for different entry qualifications. In Germany, in order to qualify for the basic three-year vocational training in nursing, a formal college entry qualification is not required. Although state legislation offers higher education entry opportunities to unqualified nursing professionals, inherent insecurities keep this target group from enrolling in these extra-occupational programs.

For this reason, the extra occupational program *Applied Nursing Science* has implemented several specific measures to promote the permeability of academic boundaries. The program was developed by the federally funded project OPEN (**OP**en **E**ducation in **N**ursing), and was added to the curriculum of the Baden-Wuerttemberg Cooperative State University (DHBW) Stuttgart in 2013. One measure to overcome higher education entry barriers is the specifically designed *Kontaktstudiengang* certificate program. In this program, students attain individual qualifications in specific nursing related subjects. Credits gained in these courses can be transferred to subsequent studies in the regular program. Intentionally, the program establishes a low-threshold to college entry, allowing prospective students to assess their own capabilities before eventually moving on to undergraduate studies.

In comparison to traditional students, the majority of students interested in extra-occupational programs in nursing, completed their formal school education some time ago, and enters college at a higher age. Therefore, insufficient command of key skills, such as computer literacy and English language skills might constitute additional barriers to higher education. To overcome these potential shortcomings, the program offers optional bridging courses for prospective students, i.e. medical English, academic writing, and computer skills.

¹ WHO, 2009

² Tuning Project, 2011: 24 f.; Büscher et al., 2010: 42

The positive impact of the certificate program on existing barriers to higher education entry becomes evident when compared to the raising number of students that continue in the regular *Advanced Nursing Science* program. In 2015, 15 out of 25 students have attended one or more certificate courses before entering the regular program. In 2016, already 21 out of 31 first-year students in the program had completed one or more of these certificate courses.

In addition, a change in student sociodemographic characteristics is already noticeable. In 2013 and 2014, students did not have the opportunity to attend certificate courses prior to entering regular undergraduate studies, and only 25 and 33 percent of those students had no formal university entrance qualification. In 2015 and 2016, however, more than half of the new students were admitted to the program solely based on their professional qualifications. These numbers show that offering low-barrier entry opportunities to higher education in nursing can foster academic self-confidence in non-traditional students.

References

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