

INTERVIEW

03. April 2024

Economy meets history

How the foundation of new universities in the 1960s and 70s increased the share of female students in Germany

Interview with Barbara Boelmann, EPOS Economic Research Center

Bonn, Mannheim, 03.04.2024 - **The female share of students at German universities is currently around 50.9 percent – the 50 percent mark was first exceeded two years ago. However, progressing towards equal opportunities took a long time. The participation of women in higher education increased partly because they were able to study in their home region more often, when local universities were founded in Germany in the 1960s and 70s. The EPOS Economic Research Center publishes this research finding in the discussion paper “Women’s Missing Mobility and the Gender Gap in Higher Education: Evidence from Germany’s University Expansion”**

Ms. Boelmann, why were local universities so important for women’s participation in higher education?

Barbara Boelmann: In post-war Germany, women were generally not very mobile and the number of female students at universities was low. Our results show that both, the lack of opportunities in German districts and the lack of role models, played a part in this.

Initially, in 1964, more than every second district had no access to a university within a radius of 40 km. Young women from these “cut-off” regions were only half as likely as their male peers to go to university. This gender gap in “cut-off” regions was twice as large as in regions with a local university.

What changed after 1964?

Barbara Boelmann: In the 1960s and 70s, many new universities opened their doors in the Federal Republic of Germany in districts where there had previously been no university. In 1964, there were just 27 institutions. By 1978 their number had risen to 53. Our analysis shows that women benefited more than men from local university foundations, narrowing the local gender gap in higher education by as much as 72 percent.

INTERVIEW

High school graduates are influenced by their local environment in their educational decisions in two ways: Firstly, the cost of studying decreases due to local proximity. Secondly, the institutions showed many young people what it means to study at university, making it more attractive to them — an effect which can be described as an “advertisement for education”. Women in particular have benefited from the increased proximity to university.

Were there similar developments in other countries?

Barbara Boelmann: Yes, many new universities were also established in other countries at that time, for example, the new colleges in the USA. In general, women have rapidly caught up in higher education in developed countries over the last 50 years and now even outnumber men, according to the World Bank.

The shortage of skilled workers has put the participation of all social groups in education on the political agenda - what should decision-makers take into account in the light of your results?

Barbara Boelmann: So far, there has been little discussion about the extent to which mobility barriers could hamper the goal of educational participation for all social groups. The present study shows that local universities help to break down barriers in higher education. This aspect is also interesting for the labor market. It means that policies should account for barriers to mobility when aiming at equal opportunities in education and training.

The presented discussion paper is a publication without peer review of the Collaborative Research Center Transregio 224 EPoS. Access the full discussion paper here : <https://www.crctr224.de/research/discussion-papers/archive/dp518>

Find the list of all discussion papers of the CRC here: <https://www.crctr224.de/research/discussion-papers>.

Author

Barbara Boelmann, Postdoctoral Researcher, Department of Economics, University of Cologne, member of EPoS Economic Research Center and ECONtribute

The Collaborative Research Center (CRC) Transregio 224 EPoS

Established in 2018, [the Collaborative Research Center Transregio 224 EPoS](https://www.crctr224.de), a cooperation of the universities Bonn and Mannheim, is a long-term research institution funded by the German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, DFG). EPoS addresses three key societal challenges: how to promote equality of opportunity; how to regulate markets in light of the internationalization and digitalization of economic activity; and how to safeguard the stability of the financial system.

Press Contact

econNEWSnetwork
Sonja Heer
Telefon + 49 (0) 40 82244284
Sonja.Heer@econ-news.de

Contact

Barbara Boelmann
University of Cologne
barbara.boelmann@uni-koeln.de

CRC TR 224 office, Marja Eisheuer

phone | +49 228 737926
e-mail | crctr224@uni-bonn.de

www.crctr224.de