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Non-Employed People in the Westpfalz Region (Germany) as Target Group of Continuing Higher Education – Potentials of a regional demand-orientation

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Abstract. It is stated that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and also continuing higher education has an influence on the development of a region. By focusing on the challenges and demands of the regional economy as well as its population, these data help to develop study programmes that meet these needs. In further education there is research suggesting that the identification and consideration of the demands of target groups helps to increase the attractiveness and participation in continuing higher education at HEIs. In this paper, the Westpfalz region (Germany) is considered as an example because it is known as structurally weak; particularly, the participation rate on further education in general, and the unemployment rate are below the national average there. For this purpose, a representative regional population survey was conducted. It describes the population of the Westpfalz region, their educational demands and it provides clues to the development of study programmes that meet their needs. The group of non-employed people stood out in this survey. In comparison with the employed group, it is astonishing that the non-employed people have a higher willingness to participate in continuing higher education. They also have more time to invest in study programmes. The paper shows interesting results of the population survey concerning the non-employed group. It also presents how these results can take up in the development of (regional) study programmes. At the end of the paper, it is reflected what potentials the demand-oriented development of continuing higher education programmes has for the regional development, which are comparable to the Westpfalz region.

Key words: continuing higher education; target groups; non-employed people; regional development

1 Introduction

In times of a globalised and digitalised division of labour, the knowledge economy has set a new agenda in the field of regional development. A sole focus on economic structures is not enough and neglects the regional population. This is where the educational potential of a region comes into play. In general, further education contributes to the improvement of job opportunities and social participation, thus having a positive effect in the development of a region (Nuissl 2000, Fritsch 2009). In this context, universities are also gaining more and more importance (Rohs et al. 2015). Due to the research-orientation, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have the possibility to assume the function as "innovation driver"

(Fritsch et al. 2008) by contributing profound knowledge about the educational needs of the regional economy as well as its population (Rohs, Steinmüller 2020). Therefore, they can react by developing study programmes that meet the needs of a region. This results in both economic and social development for a region. Referring to this, the project E^B "Education as exponent of individual and regional[1]" wanted to identify new target groups for higher education, i.e. to enlarge the social participation and to increase the level of education in the Westpfalz region (English: West Palatinate) in Germany. This region is generally considered to be structurally weak. It is therefore an aim to contribute to regional development. The overall aim is to make the participating universities into places of lifelong learning (Longworth 2006). To learn more about the region and its educational needs, the demand-oriented approach is applied by the project. In addition to many other surveys in the context of the project (for more information see Schwikal, Steinmüller 2017), the regional population survey is highlighted in this paper. The group of non-employed people has been identified as a potential new (regional) target group for continuing higher education. The following section examines how the demand-oriented development of study programmes promotes the achievement of this target group and what potentials arise for the regional development in the Westpfalz.

This paper primarily describes the Westpfalz region, followed by a brief introduction into the relationship between further education in general and continuing higher education; in particular, demand-orientation and region. After that, the representative regional population survey and its results are presented. Thus, the characteristics and educational demands of non-employed people for continuing higher education are contrasted to the traditional target group of working people. Finally, it is discussed how continuing higher education can address this target group and what potentials this has for the Westpfalz region and other comparable regions.

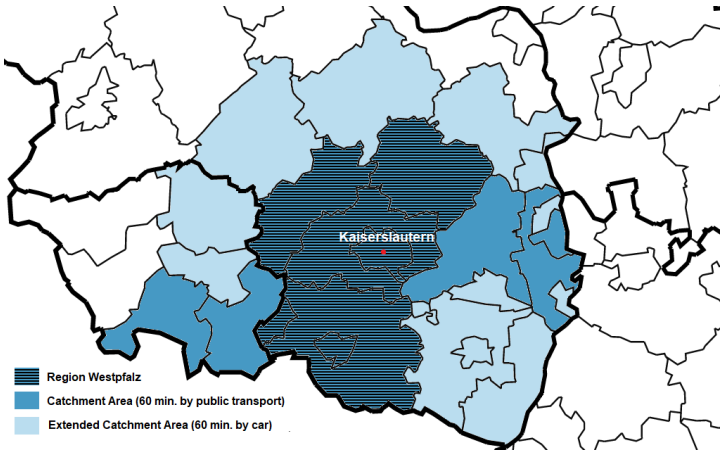
2 Description of the Westpfalz Region

In the following discussion, a delimitation of the Westpfalz region is made and special characteristics of this region are worked out. The Westpfalz region is a part of the federal state Rheinland-Pfalz in Germany. Different aspects like the administrative affiliation (see the dark blue shaded area, Figure 1), functional interrelation, homogeneity or sociocultural factors (Bernhard 2017, Dobischat et al. 2006) are possibilities for defining a region. Figure 1 shows also the aspects of defining the region in the project E^B. It shows the functional interrelation of the catchment area with public transport (see the middle blue shaded area) and by car (see the light blue shaded area) which is reachable within a duration of 60 minutes. The administrative affiliation – here: districts (see the dark blue shaded area) is also considered. More specifically, this is the so-called "extended" region of the Westpfalz or the "region E^B" (Marks 2015). Figure 1 shows the location and the relevant areas, which were central for the population survey.

By adding all relevant districts, in the region E^B has a population about 2.5 million (Statistisches Amt Saarland 2018, Statistisches Landesamt Rheinland-Pfalz 2017).

The Westpfalz region, with its centre of Kaiserslautern, limited by the administrative affiliation, is known as structurally weak. Following the statistics of the Bundesagentur für Arbeit (2019), it is characterised by a permanently higher rate of unemployment compared to the national average (5.6 percent in December 2019; total Germany: 4.9 percent). If one considers the unemployment rate among the group of those with an academic degree, this averaged only 2.2 percent (total Germany: 2.2 percent) in the 2018 reporting year (Bundesagentur für Arbeit 2019). This goes hand-in-hand with low economic growth, which is the consequence of the closure of many industrial plants (e.g. "Pfaff" – sewing machines) or relocation of production and growing competition in the Asian as well as Southern and Eastern European regions, in the wake of globalisation (e.g. companies of shoe industry in Pirmasens) since the 1990s. Since then, the region has suffered from an increasingly ageing and rapidly declining population (Ludewig et al. 2007). According to

[1]The project was a joint project between the Kaiserslautern University of Applied Sciences, the Ludwigshafen University of Business and Society and the Technische Universität Kaiserslautern. It ended in July 2020. For more information see https://www.e-hoch-b.de/e-hoch-b/



Source: Marks (2015, p. 14)
Notes: own editing

Figure 1: The Region E^B

the "Prognos Future Atlas 2019" (Prognos AG 2019), which examines the development opportunities and risks for all German regions, three districts (Kaiserslautern, Stadt; Kaiserslautern, Landkreis and Donnersbergkreis) of the Westpfalz region (dark blue shaded area) are among the regions showing the worst development in the past few years (Prognos AG 2019). In particular, it shows very large social inequalities (Prognos AG 2016). In addition, a study by the Berlin Institute for Population and Development, which evaluates the demographic sustainability of Germany's regions on the basis of a system of indicators, tends to give the Westpfalz region poor marks, especially the Südwestpfalz (English: Southwest Palatinate) (Slupina et al. 2019). Among other things, one of the lowest gross domestic products per capita in Germany as an indicator of economic strength and the highest municipal debt per inhabitant are reported. Furthermore, the "Atlas of further education in Germany" (German: Weiterbildungsatlas) reveals that the participation rate in further education, in general, is below national average (Bürmann, Frick 2016). With regard to the participation rate in continuing higher education in Germany, there is insufficient data, due to the absence of systematic recording, to date (Widany et al. 2020).

Nevertheless, the situation in the Westpfalz region has improved slightly in recent years. A forecast study of the region of Kaiserslautern indicated that the economy has changed in the last two decades. Before, there were more manufacturing companies and now the region is in a process of transition to a service, science and IT location (Kujath 2015). The next chapter briefly discusses the relationship between region and education. Besides that, it shows how the demand-oriented approach can be supportive in the development of study programmes.

3 Region, continuing higher education and demand-orientation

Against the background of globalisation and digitalisation, in general, there are increasing labour market challenges. Therefore, the demand for qualified specialists is becoming more important. Due to the demographic and structural changes, regional and social challenges are posed, e.g. ageing of the population or poor economic development opportunities (for more detail see Rohs, Steinmüller 2020). Especially structurally weak regions like the Westpfalz region are challenged to meet these requirements and to be particularly attractive and innovative in order not to succumb completely to demographic change. Therefore, in the last few years, the importance of the region for further education in general has moved into focus (Benneworth, Hospers 2007, Martin et al. 2015). The connection between learning and region was recognised in the 1970s, when the UNESCO, OECD or EU (Eckert, Tippelt 2017, Kallen, Bengtsson 1973) promoted the paradigm

of lifelong learning. Generally, the goal of lifelong-learning is the improvement of the economic and environmental competitiveness of each state and to force "education for a more highly skilled workforce; personal development leading to a more rewarding life; and the creation of a stronger and more inclusive society" (Aspin et al. 2001, p. 21). Thus, HEIs as a location for lifelong-learning moved more into the focus. They also contribute to the social, cultural and economic development of a region (Schäfer 1988). Therefore, the universities are assigned a third mission in addition to research and teaching. This is defined as:

> "Third stream activities are therefore concerned with the generation, use, application and exploitation of knowledge and other university capabilities outside academic environments. In other words, the Third Stream is about the interactions between universities and the rest of society." (Molas-Gallart et al. 2002, p. iii)

This mission is divided into three activities: Continuing (Higher) Education, Technology Transfer and Innovation, and Social Engagement (Carrión et al. 2012). In this paper, the focus is mainly on the aspect of continuing (higher) education, whereby the expansion of education is also closely linked to social engagement. Carrión et al. (2012) see educational outreach as an indicator of social engagement. According to Pasternack, Zierold (2014), universities contribute to improving the quality of life, providing public services and infrastructure or strengthening civil society.

Therefore, continuing higher education has an influence, which should not be underestimated. Rohs, Steinmüller (2020) point out that the role of continuing higher education has received little attention so far – especially in Germany. One reason is that continuing higher education in Germany is challenged to be part of the higher education and science system and of the further education market – the so called "doppelte Systembindung" (double systemic commitment) (Wolter 2005). As part of the science system, continuing higher education has access to the latest research findings and thus contributes to the transfer to society. In addition, it is subject to market structures, which results in a stronger demand-oriented development of educational offerings in the last years (Seitter et al. 2015, Wolter 2015).

In order for continuing higher education to contribute to regional development, it is necessary to know the demands (concrete and active) and needs (passive state descriptions) in the region. These educational demands are able to point out educational potentials. Information on target groups and their demands is therefore important for the accuracy of fit of study programmes. Finally, this can be transferred locally into tailor-made study programmes and ultimately helps to increase the attractiveness of educational opportunities at universities. Therefore, participation in continuing higher education increases, which contributes to regional development (Rohs, Steinmüller 2020).

In order to be able to draw conclusions for continuing higher education, it is essential to consider the demands and needs of the Westpfalz region. In this context, the project E^B conducted the population survey to get more information about the population and their educational demands or needs.

4 The Regional Population Survey

4.1 Methodical Approach

As mentioned above, a representative regional population survey was conducted (for an overview of general results see Schwikal, Steinmüller 2017). The intention was to describe the population of the region E^B and their educational needs, thereby identifying new target groups for study programmes. The aim was to draw conclusions about the demands these target groups articulate in terms of learning interests and conditions and the formats of continuing (higher) education programmes. Moreover, the data provide information on motivations and barriers to participation in further education in general, which can support the development of regionally effective educational concepts.

The survey gives a representative database of the region E^B, which means a characteristics-specific representativeness with the usual probability of error in social scientific

surveys ($p = 0.05$). In other words, there is a confidence interval of 95 percent. According to the German Census (2015), the population of the E^B region comprises about 2.5 million residents. The sample size of the survey included 521 people (at least 400 respondents were needed for representativeness) and was drawn in a two-step random selection: First, the RLD method (randomised last digit) was used to select a household in the region (household level). On the individual level, the respondent of the household was selected with the Last-Birthday method. The sample was quoted by gender distribution and age limits analogous to the Census Data (2015). Only people between 17 and 64 years were included in the survey in order to ensure that they could potentially pursue employment. The upper age limit was set at 64 years to ensure a suitable time distance to retirement. On behalf of the project E^B, the Umfragezentrum Bonn (UZBonn) conducted the survey as Computer Assisted Telephone Interview (CATI) in November and December 2016 in German. The used questionnaire was based on already existing survey instruments and items (e.g. of Adult Education Survey or Mikrozensus) to ensure reliability and validity of the questions, as well as the comparability of the results.

Before carrying out a specific data evaluation to answer the research interest mentioned above, some general socio-demographic descriptive figures from the survey are outlined. 521 people took part in the survey. Their average age was 45 years with a standard deviation of 13 years. 54 percent of the respondents were female and 46 percent were male. Almost two-thirds (63.3 percent) lived in a household with their partners, 40 percent with their children and only about one fifth of the respondents (18.1 percent) lived in a single-person household (for more details see Schwikal, Steinmüller 2017).

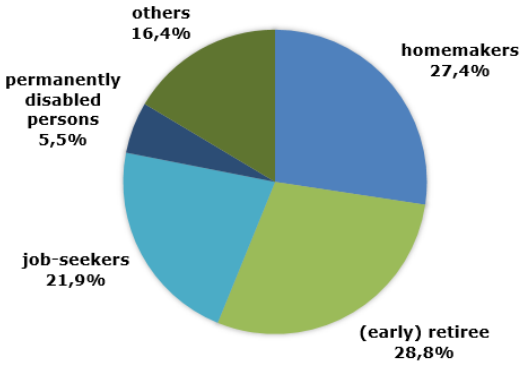
4.2 Empirical Results

4.2.1 The Group of Non-Employed People

In the survey, the question "Are you currently employed?" was included. It was noticeable that 19.8 percent ($n = 103$) answered "no". This group is composed of respondents who answered that they are neither currently working nor on parental leave. Because of the size of this group, further analyses were carried out.

A closer look on the non-employed people show that 70.9 percent ($n = 73$) of them would have the entrance qualification for participating in continuing higher education (e.g. because of graduation, previous academic degree or vocational qualification). The access requirements in Germany are usually a first academic degree or a vocational qualification and work experience (Wolter 2015). In contrast, the data show that 93.1 percent ($n = 389$) of the 418 employed people would have this entrance qualification. This represents a larger share than in the group of non-employed people (+22.2 percentage points). In the following, the groups of persons with a possible access to continuing higher education are considered. Due to the size of the non-employed group, it is interesting to analyse them as a new target group for continuing higher education. Non-employment is caused by different personal life situations: Most respondents (28.8 percent) were already (early) retired. 27.4 percent were homemakers and 21.9 percent were currently seeking employment. There were also people who are permanently disabled and unable to work (5.5 percent). All other persons and their reasons (16.4 percent) were grouped into the category "others", because they could not be assigned to any of the other groups (see Figure 2). The majority of this group of "others" were undergraduate students still in the process of completing their studies. They were potentially interested in continuing higher education, as well as persons in partial retirement, private individuals and persons undergoing restructuring.

Looking at the gender distribution, the data show that 58 percent of the non-employed people were female and 42 percent were male. The group of employed people ($n = 389$) is "more male" (47 percent) than the group of non-employed. Within the group of non-employed people, the average age was around 48 years and the majority of those surveyed, living together with their partner (61.6 percent), followed by living in a household with children (31.5 percent) and living alone (27.4 percent). For this question, it was possible to give multiple answers. Those who lived together with their children mostly had one child (60.9 percent). 21.7 percent of the respondents had two children and only 17.4 percent



Notes: in percent; $n = 73$

Figure 2: Composition of Non-Employed People in the population survey

had three children and more. Furthermore, the employed people were younger (average of 46.8 years), more often parents (+11.9 percentage points) and lived less alone (-10.5 percentage points). In addition to that, the majority of those who lived together with their children had two children (compared with mostly one child of the non-employed).

Regarding the participation in further education in the last ten years of the non-employed group, 65.8 percent have not participated in any courses lasting several weeks (two weeks to a maximum of eight weeks) or months (longer than two months). Moreover, greater than half of this group had not participated in any short-term trainings (58.9 percent). The percentages of non-participation for long-term trainings do not differ much from those of the employed group (65.3 percent). They only differ in terms of short-term trainings. Merely 28.1 percent did not take part in short-term trainings. The employed people participated more frequently in short-term trainings.

It is interesting to note that 20.5 percent of the non-employed people are considering participation in continuing higher education at a HEI in the next five years. The same percentage could not yet assess it. In comparison with the employed group, the data show a stronger rejection of participation in continuing higher education at a university over the next five years (-5.8 percentage points) and a higher proportion of indecision (+6.5 percentage points). There is a statistically significant difference between the two groups in terms of the proportion of those who can imagine attending continuing higher education at a university in the next five years is statistically significant[2].

In addition, the population was asked about their motives for participation in the past. The respondents rated on a six-step Likert scale (from 1-6) to what extent their participation motive was work-related or personal-motivated (1: attended entirely for work-related reasons to 6: entirely personal interest). Comparing the mean values of the group of non-employed ($M = 2.71$) and employed people ($M = 2.01$) shows that there is a difference between the two groups. The non-employed people were more likely to participate in further education out of personal interests. The difference in mean values were tested by the procedure of independent t-tests[3]. The t-test shows that there is a significant difference for both ($T = -2,243$; $p(t) = 0.030$). For this item, the differences between the two groups using the Cohens d method have an effect strength of $d = 0.49$. This corresponds to a small-to-medium effect.

With regard to attitudes towards further education in general, the question arises whether participants have undergone further education in order to carry out their professional activity better and to advance professionally. A six-step Likert scale (from 1: do not agree at all to 6: strongly agree) was used – the group of employed people agreed almost fully ($M = 5.39$) while the group of non-employed people simply agreed ($M = 4.02$). The

[2]At one percent significance level, based on an unpaired t-test. This indicates that the difference is not only random in the sample of this study, but that these groups also differ in the population.

[3]First of all, the necessary prerequisites must be met of variance homogeneity and normal distribution. The variance homogeneity is checked by means of the Levene-test. This test shows variance heterogeneity.

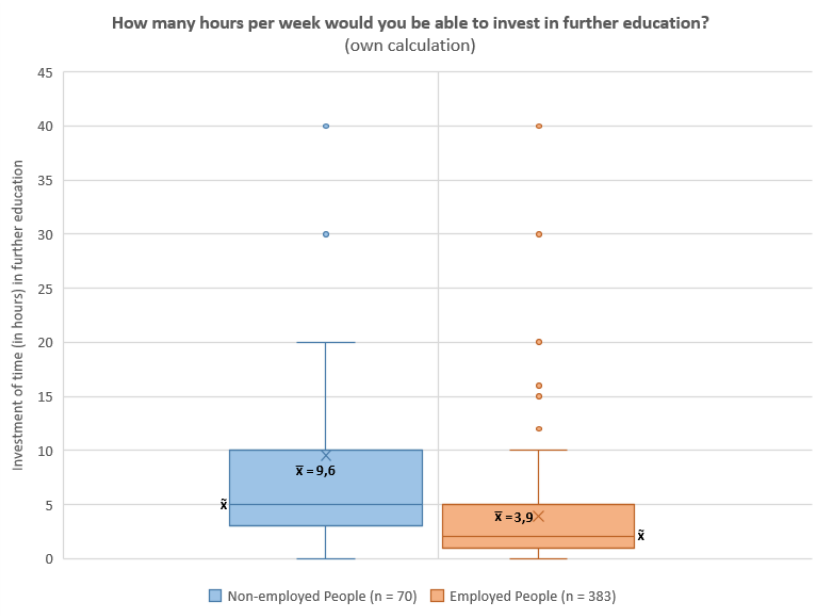


Figure 3: Boxplot of investment of time in further education by non-employed and employed people in the population survey

t-test shows that there is a significant difference ($T = 4.483$; $p(t) : 0.000$). The differences between the groups have an effect strength of $d = 0.26$ by using the Cohens d method, which means a weak effect.

Almost three-quarters of the group of non-employed people (70.8 percent) agreed that they would participate in further education if it could be more easily integrated into everyday life. This can be a barrier for participating in further education.

Furthermore, almost half of the respondents (49.3 percent) saw further education as a natural part of their personal and vocational development. There is a difference with the employed respondents (75.1 percent), who agree more strongly with this statement. 60.3 percent of the non-employed respondents rejected the statement that participation in further education is uninteresting and serves only to increase the number of job opportunities on the labour market. The rejection of this statement was about twelve percentage points higher among the working population.

A remarkable difference between the two groups concerning the investment of available time in further education is shown (see Figure 3). Employed people would be willing to spend approximately four hours per week on further education. In comparison, the non-employed group would be willing to invest at least nine and a half hours per week on further education. In particular, the subgroup of job-seekers (15.3 hours per week) stand out.

Regarding the willingness to bear the costs of further education programmes, more than half of the non-employed people (53.2 percent) would pay up to 3,000 Euros. 5,000 Euros or 10,000 Euros would be paid in each case by 23.4 percent of the respondents. Among the group of employed people was a greater willingness to pay more than 10,000 Euros for further education programmes. However, a higher proportion of non-employed people would pay 5,000 Euros up to 10,000 Euros (+9.9 percentage points compared to the group of employees).

As the format of further education programmes and the mode of learning were concerned, the non-employed preferred programmes which last over a long duration and can be completed in smaller sections (54.1 percent). Flexible entry points (58.6 percent) and opportunities to communicate with other participants (66.7 percent) were also important for them. Another aspect is relevant here: The non-employed people favoured short arrival routes (66.7 percent) and the receipt of a certificate (73.9 percent). Compared to the working population, there are only minimal differences. These results

Table 1: Further education topics in the population survey

Further Education Topics	Number of Mentions
Job and career	24
Languages	15
Information technology	14
Art, culture and history	7
Politics, economy and society	7
Environment	6
Health and nutrition	6
Natural science and technology	5
Others	7
Total:	91

can also be applied to continuing higher education, because these design requirements are also important here.

The non-employed people were also asked on which topics they would like to receive further training. Altogether many topics were named. 49 persons from the non-employed group answered this question. Thus, 91 statements were collected (see Table 1). The statements were categorised according to subject areas. There were 24 mentions in the subject area of (specific) career and profession – e.g. in the fields of geriatric care, business administration, warehouse logistics or mechatronics. Languages like English, Spanish or Italian (15 mentions) were mentioned second-most frequently and IT topics third-most frequently. There were seven mentions each for the subject areas "art, culture and history" and "politics, economy and society"; six mentions each for "health and nutrition" and "natural science and technology". They specifically mentioned scientific interests like scientific education and research results. The remaining statements were summarised under the category "others". However, it is not always clear whether the subjects were named for professional reasons or for personal interest.

In the following section, these results are discussed and what effect a demand-oriented development of study programmes may have for the regional development of the Westpfalz region.

5 Discussion of the Results

The Westpfalz region in particular, as a structurally weak region with special challenges, needs new approaches to meet them. The regional population survey helps to identify further education demands by planning (regional) study programmes. Continuing higher education in Germany has so far mainly focused on traditional target groups of those who have a first academic degree, especially working academics (Faulstich et al. 2008, Wolter 2015). Thus, it is particularly important to address new target groups. In the population survey, the group of those who are not employed was identified as such a new target group. Because of the higher rate of unemployment and lower rate of participation in further education in the Westpfalz region, it is interesting to consider this group in greater detail.

In some points, the survey responses show that both groups – non-employed and employed people – have similar expectations concerning continuing higher education. The vast majority of the two groups prefer a certificate to a bachelor's or master's degree. Regarding the mode of learning, there is also a similarity between the two groups. The importance of communication with other participants, flexible entry points and the desire to complete an offer in smaller sections over a longer period were emphasised. These aspects show that there is an understanding – independent of the group of persons – on what continuing higher education has to provide. Comparing the difference between the employed and the non-employed group, it is astonishing that the non-employed participants have a higher willingness to participate in continuing higher education. One reason could be that they have more time to spend on further education than the employed

people do. Another aspect could be that, despite the unemployment, they still want to participate in social life and civil society activities. A further indication of this is also seen in the more highly valued importance of social interaction and exchange, as it is mentioned in the statement that they prefer opportunities to communicate with other participants (66.7 percent). A third aspect is that the factor of social desirability of the responses may have also contributed to the group difference.

The results of different national studies show that persons who were involved in civil society organisations, participated in educational activities significantly more frequently (Kaufmann-Kuchta, Kuper 2017, Smith 1994). If the participation rate could be increased, a higher involvement in civil society organisations could be forced in the Westpfalz region, and thus have a positive effect on the common social life.

The population survey shows that more than 61.6 percent of the group of non-employed has no regular "traditional" university entrance qualification, which means that they have left school without Abitur by the first or second educational route. However, it is interesting that continuing higher education at HEIs is taken into consideration. In Rheinland-Pfalz in particular, the higher education regulations have been adapted for non-traditional students (e.g. persons without an academic background) to promote an increase in the educational level in the region. One conclusion would be that persons without an academic background are not yet sufficiently informed about the further education possibilities at universities. These potentials can be used by universities in cooperating with regional stakeholders to better reach this target group, e.g. through targeted marketing measures.

Another aspect could be that further education offers do not yet meet individual requirements. This is also seen in the context of the high level of agreement with the statement that they would participate in further education if it could be integrated into their everyday life more easily. The group of non-employed people had fewer family and work responsibilities than the employed people, but programmes should nevertheless be flexible to reach this target group, e.g. low threshold and short-term offers like Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) or web-based offers as an entry into study programmes. MOOCs are particularly useful here because their flexibility in terms of time and space make them easier to integrate into everyday life. Furthermore, the results demonstrate that further education was perceived as interesting and as a natural part of one's life, even though only half of the respondents agreed. One explanation might be that this item also includes vocational development, which is not relevant for all persons of the group.

A distinguishing difference between the groups, is that the non-employed population preferred short arrival routes. This may be caused by being short of money and supports the fact that mature students often choose programmes in close proximity to their place of residence (Gibbons, Vignoles 2012, Harker et al. 2001). A national study also concluded that good accessibility is particularly important for groups with a lower educational background (without university entrance qualification) to enable participation in further education (Stöhr, Baur 2018). Therefore, the university benefits as a location here, especially in light of the fact that these people are interested in scientific topics such as research results in general, history, or computer science. Regarding the third-most frequently named topic of information technologies, it is interesting that the surveyed companies in the Westpfalz region stated that they have the greatest need for further education in the area of information technology and business administration (Steinmüller 2018). If this interest is met by appropriate study programmes or courses (especially for unemployed people), this would also benefit the companies.

If the attractiveness of study programmes at universities and the participation rate will be increased for this target group in particular, e.g. through flexible programmes, this can have a positive effect on regional development. These programmes can contribute to updating professional skills, which is helpful in the context of economic development dynamics, innovations and structural changes. In general, they can contribute to raising the level of education and educational opportunities by enabling or maintaining social participation for those who are not working or who are unable to work. It is precisely through demand-oriented approach that social challenges can be identified and linked to research results. For example, the results of the population survey show that also

the non-employed participants were interested in research results or IT themes. By establishing more study courses in this area, this can accelerate the further development of the Westpfalz region into a service, science and IT location, as stated above.

In programmes, a critical and reflective examination of social changes could be supported. Further education is strengthened, which increases the attractiveness for continuing higher education and leads to a higher participation rate. If this regional target group of non-employed people is better motivated and integrated into study programmes, they will participate more on continuing higher education programmes, therefore enabling greater social participation, which could lead to more life satisfaction for them. Ultimately, this has an overall impact on society in the region. Beyond that, it helps to counteract the demographic change in the Westpfalz by increasing further education participation rate and reducing the unemployment rate. Finally, this may produce a suction effect. Eventually, more people move to the region and the settlement of companies and non-university research institution is favoured, which will also benefit regional development of the Westpfalz region (Rohs, Steinmüller 2020).

6 Conclusions

Traditionally, the group of working academics are focused on continuing higher education. In the last years, however, the higher education system in Germany has been opened up to promote access to different groups, especially those with vocational qualifications (Wolter 2015, Wolter, Kerst 2015). This is also reflected in higher education regulation (e.g. Ständige Konferenz der Kultusminister der Länder der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 2009, Landesrecht Rheinland-Pfalz 2018). It allows persons without a traditional higher education entrance qualification to study at a university in Germany. Due to economic interest, the group of employed persons is the main target group. The aim was to show to what extent other target groups are also interesting, especially regarding the challenges in the Westpfalz region, such as the demographic change and the low level of participation in further education.

The results of the regional population survey suggest that it is worth considering non-employed people as a new target group for continuing higher education. The demands for further education on the part of this target group was identified and has shown among other things that they have a higher willingness to participate than the employed group. These results also give hints for other regions with a high rate of non-employed people who are basically fit for work, or for regions that are confronted with social problems, but where non-employed people are interested in research findings or scientific topics. This could help to arouse their interest in social engagement, which could have an overall positive impact for region with social problems. In this contribution, the demands of the target groups were mainly considered, but these are always in relation to social and entrepreneurial demands.

The opportunity to base the development of study programmes on such data not only help to make continuing higher education at HEIs more attractive, it also allows a wider focus on new target groups and possibilities to influence regional development through continuing higher education. In addition, such a demand-oriented development of continuing higher education programmes should be forced to comply with the responsibility of HEIs. Thereby, a rise in the attractiveness and competitiveness of the region as a business location is entailed, the impending shortage of skilled workers is counteracted and social participation is improved (Teichler 1991, Wolter 2011). This demand-orientation is advantageous in many respects, also for other regions that have similar regional challenges. Even it involves a lot of effort.

It has been shown that the group of non-employed could also contribute to regional development if the needs of this target group are given greater consideration in the development of study programmes in continuing higher education. Here it is exciting to carry out further research into the extent to which a demand-oriented approach really increases the participation of the corresponding target group.

Consequently, universities and continuing higher education, in particular, have a special responsibility in regards to regional development by increasing attractiveness and

prosperity of a region, particularly for the structural weak Westpfalz region and other regions with similar characteristics. If the development and design of study programmes will be geared to the needs of the different regional target groups, there is at least an opportunity to meet the social and economic challenges of a region. Therefore, demand-oriented development of study programmes can serve as a catalyst for regional development. In this way, the universities also fulfil their tasks as described in the third mission. Ultimately, universities really become places of lifelong-learning.

It is assumed that further education in general, and continuing higher education in particular is of outstanding importance, has a demonstrable (potential) significance for the course of regional developments, and thus also represents a resource that could be drawn upon in the context of efforts (Nuissl 2000) – not only for the Westpfalz region. It would be worthwhile to have more specific, empirical data on this target group of non-employed people from other regions, especially with regard to their expectations by participation in continuing higher education. Previously, it would also be interesting to seek out other new region-specific target groups for continuing higher education in order to increase the attractiveness and the participation rate. In the long term, it is then necessary to investigate whether a demand-oriented approach really have a positive effect to regional development.

In the future, it is important to identify the further education demands of the regional population and companies. In addition, for universities and regional players it will be essential to cooperate more closely in order to collect these data and therefore develop programmes that meet regional challenges.

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