

Does distance determine who attends a university in Germany?

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Abstract

In past research, participation in higher education has been analysed mainly in terms of the role of costs and return expectations or economic incentives. Outside the classical economic literature, participation in higher education is traditionally explained by regional differences, such as those between rural and urban areas. Yet to our knowledge, the specific distance from the nearest university has not yet been analysed in detail. The present study assesses the role of distance from a university for the decision to attend higher education in Germany. Students who live near a university can avoid moving and the increased living expenses by commuting to the university. Thus, the greater the distance to the nearest university, the lower the participation in higher education. We analyse this hypothesis by combining data from the German Socio-Economic Panel Study (SOEP) with a database from the German Rectors' Conference on university postal codes. Based on an independent competing risk model that allows for four different types of transitions (among them, the transition into higher education) we show that distance plays a significant role, in particular for the distance from the closest university. The effect is not significant for the distance from the nearest university of applied science. We do distinguish between distances from the nearest state university, private university or church-based university.