

Requirements, current status and recommendations on the Online Access Act (OZG) at German universities

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Abstract

The German Online Access Act (OZG) legally paves the way for the implementation of the EU regulation "Single Digital Gateway", which provides for digital availability of public services in the EU by January 2024. With this, the EU defines the standard for making public administration faster, more efficient, more user-friendly and consistently digital for citizens.

For the higher education sector, Germany has set up a coordinated implementation management for the so-called "study life situation", although universities are not a focus of OZG. Beyond the OZG, there are model projects in which digitised formats of data exchange are being developed in the national and European context. In addition, universities have used digitised solutions for study-related services such as application, admission, enrolment and administration of study and examination processes for quite some time.

An overarching study should now show the relationships between the various activities and at the same time outline what remains to be done to implement the OZG.

The study certifies that digital administrative services for students at higher education institutions can be described as far advanced. However, with regard to networking purposes of HEIs, especially with state agencies, important legal, institutional and technical prerequisites are lacking to allow for implementing the solutions already developed in model projects as extensively as possible. The study provides recommendations for action for decision-makers at federal and state level, universities

and IT service providers and is important for a European discussion of the results because it shows the complex structure of the political multi-level system in the implementation of digitisation for the higher education sector. At the same time, it makes clear that successful results can only be achieved through networking and involvement of all relevant levels and not through centralisation alone.

1 Introduction

The Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) in Germany has been involved in a variety of initiatives for the mutual recognition of European educational qualifications for some time. This also concerns participation in digitalization projects to develop formats for data exchange. However, the BMBF lacked knowledge about the prerequisites for implementing these formats in the digital structure of higher education institutions. The BMBF took the entry into force of the Online Access Act (OZG), which applies nationwide, as an opportunity to examine the challenges of its implementation for the *Lebenslage Studium* (situation of studying). In particular, the technical and institutional requirements for interoperability between higher education institutions and the web portals of the *Länder* (German federal states) in the portal network were to be clarified. This also included questions about the

- content-related and functional requirements for the IT infrastructures of higher education institutions (including IT portals in the context of higher education, campus management systems) and their interoperability between higher education institutions, federal and state administration portals and at the European level, as well as on
- exemplary application scenarios and strategic approaches to e-government for higher education institutions.

2 Status of OZG implementation

The study has shown that the services in the universities for the "situation of studying" are digitalized to a high degree (Ruschmeier et al. 2020). However, this relates almost exclusively to the "process automation" within the higher education institutions, not to the networking required by the OZG. Above all, the interoperable linking of the service-providing level at the universities with a state-wide portal network and an associated uniform user account is not yet OZG-compliant. In the area of valid and binding signatures and authentication or authenticity checks, as well as in some aspects of improved usability, the already existing technical possibilities are not yet fully utilized. In addition, the e-government laws of the federal states in Germany, which are also supposed to create and shape the conditions for the implementation of the OZG, are very different. In implementing the OZG, higher education institutions are confronted with a variety of legal claims, e.g. through administrative procedure laws, which is not easy to navigate.

The activities of selected, but highly active, pilot higher education institutions are limited to cooperation in model projects at national (XHochschule 2020a) and international level in the development of data exchange formats (XHochschule 2020b) to facilitate the recognition of educational qualifications throughout Europe. However, as with the OZG in general, this involvement has only recently attracted some attention in the HEIs not involved in those projects.

3 Case studies

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the process dimension of digital administrative workflows and their interoperable connectivity to externally provided administrative portals and networks, both national and international case studies were created that can serve as "lighthouses" and showcase projects for a nationwide implementation of the OZG in German higher education institutions. This applies in particular to the completely paperless application and enrolment process or the digital use of certificate registers, e.g. on a blockchain basis for authentication checks during enrolment. In addition, the transferability of digital practices in other European countries (e.g. Norway, the Netherlands) was examined, in particular for the use of international exchange formats for study achievements and credits or for the institutionalization of central digital services for the higher education sector.

4 Recommendations

The study makes recommendations at the federal, state, higher education and inter-university levels, which relate in particular to the institutional prerequisites for the networking between higher education institutions and state administration required by the OZG. With regard to the European dimension, on the one hand, the national legal prerequisites must be created in order to be able to implement the solutions developed so far at the level of national or European model projects across the board (European Commission 2018). On the other hand, the establishment of (also European) networking in the context of uniform data exchange formats must be based on the state of digitalization already achieved in the respective national states (cf. for Estonia: Bhattarai et al. 2019).

5 References

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