

Evaluating bachelor degree programs in Public Administration: methodological considerations

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As the German public sector and the capital's administration in particular face severe staff shortage, evaluating degree programs in public administration is an important strategy for ensuring that skilled graduates join the public sector work force. This paper describes a theory-driven, multi-faceted approach to evaluating BA degrees programs in public administration and discusses methodological opportunities and challenges. A BA program at the Berlin School of Economics and Law, which exists in three separate formats: (a) traditional in-person instruction, (b) blended instruction and (c) dual instruction, serves as a case study. The evaluation aims to understand associations between student characteristics, different formats of instruction and program organization, and student success. It employs a mixed-methods design and combines longitudinal standard survey and interview methodology with participatory approaches. Rigorous program evaluations embedded in the particular university contexts can drive positive and practically relevant changes in teaching public administration to ensure qualified graduates.

1 Introduction

The German public sector and in particular that of its capital Berlin face a severe lack of skilled employees and prospective applicants. The problem is pronounced in midlevel career tracks, which require applicants to have completed a bachelor (BA) program in public administration (pwc, 2022). Over the course of the next ten years, a wave of retirements will add to the challenge of filling vacant positions with graduates of the respective BA programs (Kösters, 2019).

To address staff shortage and make public sector careers attractive to an increasingly diverse population, the Berlin administration has significantly broadened its marketing and communication efforts. It advertises job security and benefits, career opportunities, a wide range of tasks and responsibilities and a work environment that values diversity in employees' demographic characteristics, experiences and skills (Integration officer of the state government of Berlin, 2019, Senate of Berlin, 2020).

At the same time, higher education institutions are broadening their portfolio of degree programs to attract a wider range of prospective students, also in public administration (German Rectors' Conference (HRK), 2022). Current and prospective students in Germany have become diverse in terms of age, ethnicity, migration background, marital and familial situation, as

well as in their prior professional and educational experiences (Wolter, 2012). As all these factors predict academic success (Grendel et al., 2014; Schneider and Preckel, 2017), they should be considered when (re)designing degree programs in higher education. Therefore, BA degree programs in public administration need to effectively support a heterogeneous student body and its diverse needs, and adapt their curriculum to the requirements of modern and future-oriented administrative work to ensure qualified graduates (O'Neill, 2022).

Little is known on whether and how characteristics of a degree program's instruction and organization impact the development of skills and competencies, especially for public administration work, and how these characteristics may interact with student characteristics (including students' motives and expectations for careers in public administration) (Grimm & Bock, 2022; DeRiviere et al., 2021). Student diversity and „person-study format fit“ have so far, to the best of our knowledge, not been rigorously studied in public administration education, despite research showing that both individual and environmental variables influence public administration students' academic success (Staar et al., 2018). Therefore, theory-driven evaluation approaches are required especially for BA degree programs to provide universities with much needed knowledge about the effectiveness of

their investments and efforts to attract and develop students for public administration jobs.

Based on a review of approaches to evaluate degree programs in higher education, this paper presents the study design and methodology of a theory-driven evaluation of the BA degree program in public administration at the Berlin School of Economics and Law (in German: HWR Berlin). The evaluation compares the program's three distinct formats of instruction and organization, and examines whether and how differences in instruction and learning interact with student variables to impact the development of key competencies and academic success. It employs a mixed-methods design and combines longitudinal standardized survey and interview methodologies with participatory approaches. The evaluation (which runs until the end of 2024) includes participatory approaches and prioritizes the transfer of practically relevant research findings throughout the duration of the project.

The HWR Berlin is the primary institute of higher education in the German capital to offer BA degree programs in public administration that are directly geared towards preparing students for a mid-level civil servant career in local, state or federal administration. To attract more students, address the needs of an increasingly diverse student body, and thus help address the state's staff shortage, the HWR Berlin recently diversified the format of its flagship BA degree program in public administration. The program now exists in three distinct formats that vary significantly in instruction and organization but not in content: 1. traditional in-person instruction, 2. blended instruction that combines online and in-person instruction in regular intervals, and 3. dual instruction that alternates periods of in-person instruction at the university with longer phases of learning in practice settings. The program thus serves as an ideal context for studying impacts of study instruction and organization on student success while considering methodological issues when rigorously evaluating degree programs in public administration.

Based on the HWR example, the paper discusses conceptual, methodological, and operational challenges when evaluating BA degree programs in public administration and offers

possible solutions. We argue that rigorous program evaluations, which are embedded in the particular context of the university can drive positive and practically relevant changes in teaching public administration.

2 Evaluating degree programs in higher education

Evaluation is a subsection of the highly interdisciplinary field of higher education research (Wilkesmann, 2021). Its overarching goal is the assurance of quality, and if possible, the improvement of quality in higher education programs. Evaluations may focus on all university core activities — research, teaching, and learning — across all levels of an academic institution (Reichert, 2019). The evaluation of research strives to ensure a high standard of the scientific process. The evaluation of teaching and teachers, on the other hand, pursues diverse goals. For example, aims may be to promote the quality of teaching, to uncover course material that may need to be altered, or to compare teachers as a basis for performance related bonuses. Finally, the evaluation of learning examines cause-effect relationships that can predict student success (Kelle & Metje, 2010). Evaluations of courses or programs of study include elements of both teaching and learning evaluations and may differ in their specific focus. They are considered part of a university's and especially a department's responsibility towards students to ensure adequate teaching and program organization and to detect any student needs that may not be sufficiently covered (Wilson et al., 2021). In order to evaluate and consequently improve a degree program, student characteristics and developmental trajectories as well as structural context need to be considered and their interactions better understood (Salland, 2018).

2.1 Challenges of study program evaluations

When study programs are evaluated, the first main challenge arises from the diverse and sometimes contradictory expectations placed on higher education (Wilkesmann, 2021). Study programs are supposed to impart specialized knowledge and scientific methods, prepare students for the labor market, strengthen soft skills, and adapt to students' different needs. There-

fore, study program evaluations have to consider different goals or explicitly focus on selected goals only.

Second, evaluations are complicated due to the myriad of known and potential factors that influence students' success. Evaluations of study programs have been criticized for focusing too much on biographical or demographic student data and neglecting psychological variables and social effects as influencing factors (Zeng et al., 2023). Although there are associations between students' biographical data and their academic success (Zhang & Kuncel, 2020), psychosocial factors in particular play a large part in determining academic success (Fong et al., 2017; Grendel et al., 2014; Schneider & Preckel, 2017) and therefore should not be neglected in the evaluation of a program. Students' needs, experiences, and motivations are paramount to their successful studies and should therefore be part of an evaluation of study programs (Grunschel et al., 2021).

A third challenge program evaluations face, is that of representing different perspectives. Not only the students' perspective but also that of other important stakeholders must be taken into account. For example, teaching staff, program managers, and administrators, who primarily design a degree program, should be included in the evaluation (Reichert, 2021). Since the evaluation of study programs in general, and the evaluation of public administration courses in particular, are frequently linked to a political agenda, it is also recommended to include university management as well as extra-institutional contact partners such as supervisory authorities in the evaluation process (Wolter, 2011). In order to develop practical applications and recommendations, it is also advised to include existing university services, e.g., psychological support, career service, the writing center, the library, or general student services.

2.2 Leveraging mixed-methods and triangulation in program evaluations

Mixed-method designs, which combine quantitative and qualitative research methods, have gained prominence in social science research in recent decades, but are still underrepresented in higher education research (Seyfried & Reith, 2019). When evaluating study programs in higher education mixed-methods approaches

are particularly useful for collecting comprehensive data, involving diverse stakeholders, and generating meaningful recommendations for practice (Bosse & Barnat, 2019; Hüther & Krücken, 2015; Knödler, 2019).

A combination of quantitative methods such as standardized surveys and qualitative methods such as focus groups, participatory designs and interviews allows evaluators to gather primary data from multiple stakeholders (Kelle & Metje, 2010). However, it is mandatory that study program evaluations include the perspective of students, ideally both quantitatively and qualitatively. Standardized, quantitative surveys of students can help to answer research questions regarding student success and the importance of variables at the individual level. They provide insight into students' needs, expectations, and motivations and can simultaneously reach different student cohorts, ranging from first-year students to alumni. Cross-sectional surveys provide valuable snapshots and can be repeated later to depict developments over time.

Longitudinal data obtained through panel designs can track students' individual development. As experiments are incredibly rare in university research and evaluations, repeated measures are particularly useful when attempting to draw conclusions about causal relationships. However, panel designs are time-consuming. In addition, their validity can be affected by high sample attrition (Pohlenz et al., 2016). Moreover, the validity of quantitative surveys also depends on the sophistication of the theoretical frameworks that inform their design. In the context of higher education research, a conflict between scientific ambition and practical relevance can lead to neglecting theoretical and methodological underpinnings, which may diminish the validity of the data (Wilkesmann, 2021; Wolter, 2011).

Shortcomings of the quantitative approach to evaluating university courses can be compensated partially by incorporating qualitative methods (Kelle & Metje, 2010; Hüther & Krücken, 2015). Typically, methods such as interviews and focus groups can help understand specific issues and contextual nuances that are not captured in standardized methods but are critical for program evaluations and the development of

practical implications. Such qualitative methods, however, are affected by the relationship between the researchers and the interviewed persons. Researchers responsible for program evaluations may often have ties to the university or even the specific program and thus cannot fulfill the role of a neutral observer (Wilkesmann, 2017). There are also power differences that need to be considered when students are interviewed by members of their department/university about experiences in a specific study program. The employment of qualitative data thus requires evaluators to self-reflect on their own role in the process. If evaluators do not engage in self-reflection and question their (in)dependence, the validity of the qualitatively collected data may also be limited.

Administrative data can also be included in program evaluations. University databases include information such as dropout rates or numbers of applications and hold information on the popularity of certain study programs. Moreover, data provided by university IT systems quantify students' learning experience. For example, a record of the frequency with which students use online resources and learning platforms (Ifenhaller, 2020) may be examined as indicators of engagement and collaboration, which have been linked with academic success (Zeng et al., 2023). Administrative data, however, do not allow the inference of causal relationships between demographic student variables, study-related characteristic, or the subjective experience of the studies and students' academic success. Similar limitations characterize study designs that rely on social security numbers. Administrative data allows for structural analyses, but information on the psychological and emotional experience of being a student in the particular study program under evaluation is missing. Thus, directly surveying students (and faculty members) cannot be replaced by the use of secondary, administrative data.

Participatory research methods have been used sporadically in higher education research (Salazar, 2022; Curtis et al., 2021; Seale, 2009). They place those who are expected to benefit from the research at the center of the data collection process. For example, students (or other stakeholders) are not only interviewed, but are also involved in critical, methodological, and substantive reflection and decision-making.

Student participation can be fostered through student advisory boards, student research assistants, collaborations with existing student groups at the university, and study courses (electives) that focus on the evaluation itself and engage students at multiple stages of the research process. Examples may refer to developing research questions, publishing the research or communicating findings to diverse audiences. One central advantage of participatory tools is that those students enrolled in the study program during the time of the evaluation may still face benefits even though they are less likely to directly benefit from long-term changes implemented after the completed evaluation. In practice, however, research and evaluation projects with participatory designs differ greatly in the extent to which they implement the principles of participatory research (Brown, 2022). Thus, a distinction must be made between projects that "only" involve students (or other stakeholders) using participatory methods and those in which these groups are equal partners in the evaluation process that have direct influence on question formulation, data collection, analysis, and communication of findings (Brown, 2022).

3 The BA degree program "Public Administration" at the Berlin School of Economics and Law (HWR Berlin)

Historically, civil servants in German public administration were exclusively trained through apprenticeship and degree programs within public administration academies. Those academies function as education service providers to national, state and local governments, respectively; their program organization and curricular content are directly overseen by state administrators (Schröter & Röder, 2015). Over the last decades demand for public administration education, however, has risen (Reichard, 2017) while educational pathways into administrative jobs in the public sector have diversified. Today, about half of Germany's sixteen states, including Berlin, have juridically independent public universities of applied sciences that offer formally accredited BA, master and executive study programs in public administration to prepare students for careers in mid- and upper-level public administration positions (Hajnal, 2015; Ysa, Hammerschmid, and Albareda, 2017). Administrators and instructors in university programs of public administration are – in

contrast to their counterparts in public administration academies – free to develop course content and employ teaching methods based on a broadly prescribed curriculum (Hajnal, 2015).

As the first institute of higher education in Germany, the HWR Berlin offers a public administration BA degree program in three formats that vary in their instruction and organization but not in content, curriculum and examination regulations. The three formats are (a) in-person instruction, (b) blended instruction and (c) dual instruction – each of which is described in more detail below. All three formats are hosted by the Department of General Administration at the HWR Berlin. The curriculum combines legal, administrative, social, economic and political science modules amounting to 210 ECTS across 25 modules, with legal topics accounting for 50% of all credits (for more information see the study and exam regulations of the President of the HWR Berlin, 2023). These characteristics are representative of public administration BA programs across Germany (Hajnal, 2015). Students apply with their higher education entrance qualification (“Allgemeine Hochschulreife” or “Fachhochschulreife”). Upon completion, graduates from the three formats of instruction and program organization at HWR Berlin formally hold equal qualifications for the same civil sector positions at the local, state and federal level.

Tables 1 to 3 summarize key characteristics of each of the HWR’s BA degree in public administration’s three formats of study, highlighting similarities and differences across instruction and program organization. Below we discuss each format in more detail.

3.2 Format 1: In-person instruction

The traditional format of in-person instruction means that students learn through in-person lectures and seminars within the regular semester schedule (2 semesters making up one academic year, with longer semester breaks in February/March and August/September), each semester ending with a period of in-person exams. Two mandatory 6-month internships covering the third and the sixth semester are part of the BA program. As experiences in online-instruction increased rapidly during the pandemic, limited amounts of online instructions are now also part of this albeit traditionally designed program of study. The standard length of study is seven

semesters, the equivalent to 3,5 academic years. Students can enroll in this format every fall semester.

This program of study attracts relatively young students who enter university right after graduating high school and thus with little professional experience. However, older students who want to reorient themselves professionally also choose this study format. Some, but generally few students decide to complete their studies in six rather than seven semesters. In this case, they forego one of the mandatory internships associated with the formal qualification for a civil service career.

Table 1: Characteristics of the in-person BA program

In-person instruction
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • in-person classes (supplemented with limited online-instruction) • Full-time • 7 semesters (210 ECTS) • 2 internships during the third and sixth semester • Semester fee: approximately 248€

3.3 Format 2: Blended instruction

The blended format of instruction and organization means that in each semester instruction alternates between a full week of in-person seminars and lectures followed by a week of asynchronous online learning, ending with in-person examinations at the end of the semester. This regular alternating schedule allows students greater flexibility, especially in terms of organizing part-time work around their studies. Students also have to complete two internships during the third and sixth semester.

The blended format is thus primarily aimed at applicants who are already working in local or state government and wish to advance in their administrative positions. The blended format also potentially offers students with family obligations the opportunity to acquire a qualification in a way that is more compatible with their lives than studying in full attendance (see Voigt et al., 2021, for a detailed description of the planning and implementation of the blended study format since 2015). The standard length of study is seven semesters. Students can enroll in this format every spring semester.

Table 2: Characteristics of the blended BA program

Blended instruction
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alternating between a full week of in-person classes followed by a full week of asynchronous online-learning, with a period of in-person exams at the end of the semester • Full-time • 7 semesters (210 ECTS) • 2 internships during the third and sixth semester (exceptions may apply to students with relevant work experience) • Semester fee: approximately 248€

3.4 Format 3: Dual instruction

Finally, the dual format of instruction and organization is a degree program that HWR Berlin offers in close cooperation with the state of Berlin. Students apply directly to the state of Berlin for a limited number of spots. Successful applicants sign a work contract with their selected state department and receive a tuition fee throughout their studies. Additionally, the state of Berlin covers regular study fees (about 248 Euros per semester) and students receive a monthly stipend of currently around Euros 1.100 in the first two years of their education and increasing in later years.

The dual format is unique in dividing the prescribed 12 months of practical work experience (2 semester-long internships in the other two program formats) into five shorter work installments and one longer period in the third semester. As a result, students fulfill their academic and work requirements within six semesters. Students receive their academic instruction, like their counterparts in the in-person format, through in-person lectures and seminar, with limited elements of online instructions allowed. Attendance during the regular lecture periods at the university and during the work placements in the respective institutions of the state of Berlin is compulsory.

With its high workload and less free time the dual format is designed to appeal to particularly determined and performance-oriented students. Students in the dual study format face the challenge of completing regular work intervals while fulfilling the same academic expectations

as their fellow students in other study formats (Hesser & Langfeldt, 2018). While later employment opportunities are good for graduates from all of the three study formats, the dual study format further incentivizes its students with the guarantee of immediate employment upon graduation.

Table 3: Characteristics of the dual BA program

Dual instruction
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-person classes (supplemented with limited online-instruction) • Mandatory attendance • Full-time • 6 semesters (210 ECTS) • Work placements in state departments • Semester fee covered by the state • Study/Employment contract with the state, includes a monthly stipend

4 Evaluation questions and goals

The BA program of public administration at the HWR Berlin is currently undergoing a multi-year, mixed method, theory-driven evaluation. This evaluation is important given the programs' ambitious goals and the aim to attract and properly serve an increasing number of diverse applicants to be able to satisfy the state's dire need to future employees.

The current evaluation seeks to better understand pathways to student success in the programs' distinct formats of instruction and learning and to identify aspects of the program that are in need to improvement to facilitate positive developments. It focusses on diverse students' prerequisites, experiences and needs as well as commonalities and differences in the three formats of instruction and learning. The guiding assumption is that different program formats can partially satisfy students' needs and motivations.

Three central questions guide this evaluation thus are:

- How do the three program formats – in-person, blended and dual - shape students' knowledge acquisition, development of competencies and academic outcomes?

- Can attributes of the three program formats and student characteristics (and/or a combination of these factors) explain differences in student success over time?
- What viable interventions can support specific student groups?

The evaluation seeks to produce practical knowledge for HWR Berlin as well as BA programs in public administration more generally, and to transfer that knowledge into practice.

5 Framework and methodology

5.1 Conceptual framework

The evaluation's conceptual framework draws on perspectives and themes from organizational psychology, which place the university as a whole at the center of this evaluation (for an overview see: Nerding et al., 2008). The BA program in public administration is a structural unit within the university and the three program formats make up distinct units within that organization. Within this structure, 10 steps can be differentiated from student recruitment to successful graduation by which students enter, pass through and eventually leave the BA program in public administration analog to that of an employee entering a company, working for it and at some point, leaving it. These themes inform the evaluation's data collection and analysis as they help to plan and structure the work packages across the project's timeline:

- (1) Addressing potential applicants
- (2) Marketing of the BA program in its various formats
- (3) Defining student requirement profiles
- (4) Specifying methods for student selection
- (5) Assessing study conditions
- (6) Evaluating teaching
- (7) Analyzing exam formats
- (8) Addressing holistic student development
- (9) Shaping organizational culture
- (10) Assessing drop-out and graduation

During steps 1 to 4, the evaluation focusses on questions regarding how to successfully address applicants, how to advertise the BA programs to potential students, which requirements

applicants need to fulfill and how best to select applicants. The aim is to examine how students' diverse demographic characteristics as well as their varied study-related experiences and expectations correlate with academic readiness at the time of entering the study program and especially how these factors vary across formats of instruction and learning.

During steps 5 to 7, and analog to working conditions in a company, the conceptual framework highlights important aspects of the study context, learning environments and examination regulations that students face. Here the evaluation focusses on how different study conditions may influence academic success, how students experience different formats of instruction and organization, internships, teaching methods and types of exams, and how these experiences correlate with academic development over time. Findings from steps 5 to 7 are especially relevant for teaching staff, and those tasked with developing and updating the BA course program.

Once students have progressed in their studies, questions regarding the organizational culture of the university department and the degree program are of interest during steps 8 and 9. Students' interdisciplinary development, their identification and attachment with fellow students as well as their attitudes toward diversity are examined and linked to students' well-being and academic success. Findings from steps 8 and 9 may be of particular relevance to university staff responsible for social support and mental health counseling.

The evaluation concludes with an analysis of graduation and dropout rates and associated factors during step 10. One focus lies on whether, how, and why graduation and dropout rates differ across the three program formats and how student success can be predicted based on personal and contextual factors. A second focus lies in understanding students' employment preferences and choices, particularly different levels and thematic areas within public administration.

5.2 Mixed methods

The program evaluation follows a mixed-methods design that combines quantitative and qualitative methods across three areas of activities. Below, we describe these areas of activities in more detail.

Surveys and focus groups

Surveying the experience of students in the BA of public administration is the first priority in evaluating the program. A standardized, quantitative survey is administered to students at the beginning of every semester, resulting in longitudinal panel data. As students enter the BA program, the survey assesses student demographics and prior experiences relevant to their studies (e.g., personality, test anxiety, learning and performance goals, emotions, self-efficacy, diversity attitudes, etc.). Over the course of their studies, students continue to report on these potentially changing emotions and attitudes, as well as on a variety of topics related to social and interpersonal aspects of their studies, such as support from instructors and teachers, social integration and diversity experiences. The survey further includes measures of academic success and of perceived knowledge and competency development. In order to evaluate the fit between the training in public administration and later professional tasks, students report on how relevant competencies are fostered through their studies and which employers they aspire to work for. Data from this standardized, quantitative survey are supplemented with administrative, quantitative data, depending on availability.

Data from the panel survey is also supplemented by qualitative data gained through focus group discussions. The purpose of these discussions is to a) explore topics not covered or only partially covered by the survey that are better suited for qualitative methods; b) explore and contextualize the significance of initial findings from the quantitative surveys; and c) discuss potential interventions.

Again, with the goal of aligning education and profession, interviews with individual stakeholders on key topics related to higher education in public administration round out the evaluation's data set. Especially, state and local-level repre-

sentatives responsible for human resource development and marketing add a valuable perspective to this evaluation.

Participation

The evaluation includes a number of specific participatory methods all aimed at directly involving students as co-designers in the program evaluation. This approach allows institutions of higher education to include the voice of those directly affected by the BA program and future interventions. In the current project, participation includes a student steering committee that meets once a semester, student research assistance and elective courses that focus on the design and the analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data and as such provide students hands-on experience with the methodology of the project. All these instruments offer opportunities for students to help interpreting and communicating findings.

Inviting students to actively participate in the evaluation project begets three major advantages. First and foremost, the project can benefit from students' perspectives and ideas. By encouraging students to give feedback on the design of the program evaluation, potential blind spots of the involved researchers may be counterbalanced. Secondly, by being involved in the evaluation process, students can already benefit from the ongoing study before changes are implemented into the course curriculum. Third, student participation offers a hands-on approach to gaining methodological, scientific and communicative competencies. Finally, acting as a member of an advisory board, for example, allows students to try out new roles, and offers opportunities for self-reflection and social integration.

Transfer and communication

This area of activity includes workshop formats that bring together teachers, program managers, university administration employees, and other interested parties to discuss and disseminate research findings, and to translate them into action plans to foster timely transfer into practice. Lectures, workshops and discussion rounds are ways to promote collegial learning, generate new ways of applying the lessons learned and ensure that those responsible for

following through with the evaluation's practical implications are on board.

Additionally, communicating with all stakeholders ensures that not "only" students are heard (Kromrey, 2000) and greatly increases the likelihood that the evaluation's findings are applied in the practical setting of public administration (Ritz et al., 2016). Communication between institutions of higher education and representatives of the public sector has been shown to be highly reliant on personal contacts (O'Neill, 2022). In the context of the program evaluation, this close-knit communication between the HWR Berlin and the capital's public administration is seen as a strength and is fostered.

6 Benefits and implications

The design of the described evaluation holds particular benefits for the HWR Berlin, but also for other institutions of higher education that offer degree programs in public administration and more generally for state- and local level government that are looking to employ well-trained graduates.

First, the longitudinal design allows for recommendations targeted at particular moments or phases during the specific degree program studied. The evaluation may for example point toward an entire cohort needing support at certain points during their studies, e.g., when re-entering academic studies after completing the 6-month internship. The longitudinal design also allows to examine development and learning in combination with individual characteristics, especially those that have been associated with a heightened risk of dropping out, e.g., students with pre-tertiary education (Tieben, 2020), students who are the first in their families to attend university (Ishitani, 2003), or students who are low in intrinsic motivation (Grunschel et al., 2021).

Second, by comparing students in three separate formats of study, the evaluation can help to differentiate between challenges the entire student body grapples with over the course of their studies, challenges that are program specific as well as individual challenges that subsets of students may face. The HWR Berlin can draw on the results to adapt criteria and processes by which the university reaches out, communicates with and finally selects prospective students.

The evaluation may thus foster evidence-based decision making around how the university supports existing students, both through diversity in program instruction and organization and through additional services.

Third, as the three program formats – in-person, blended, and dual - are hypothesized to attract different kinds of students, the evaluation is likely to provide insights on degree program design, organization and marketing that are relevant beyond the HWR Berlin, especially for institutions that are looking to attract and effectively support a more diverse student body. Degree programs in public administration cannot merely concern themselves with conveying knowledge but must also foster relevant skills and competencies, while meeting diverse student needs in its formats of instruction and organizing. Complementing programs of traditional in-person instructions with formats of blended and dual instruction is one promising way of attracting students and supporting them effectively.

Finally, public administration, and especially the state of Berlin with its high demand for employees, may use findings from this evaluation to adapt their recruitment strategies as well as training and career opportunities for current employees. As the evaluation provides insights about "person-study-program fit", it also offers the opportunity to reflect on current employment strategies in public administration, especially the question how to attract and retain a diverse work force. The latter is critical as a more diverse pool of applicants not only helps to reduce staff shortage but also to foster and value a population of state employees who represent society as a whole (Baracska, 2021).

7 Conclusion

The here described project combines quantitative and qualitative methods, in part using a longitudinal design, with participatory approaches and a strong focus on transfer to meet the diverse challenges of scientifically sound and practically relevant program evaluations that are embedded in the practical realities of universities. Findings from this and similar evaluations make valuable contributions to a growing literature on higher education. They allow us to test theories and hypotheses on the relationships between student level characteristics, context

variables and student learning and academic success. Insights on the instructional and organizational advantages and disadvantages of different study formats may be transferred to other programs of study. Overall, these analyses contribute to important and ongoing debates on access and equality in the higher education system.

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