

Chapter 1

Introduction

The German higher education system has a remarkably rich history. When Wilhelm von Humboldt established the Berlin University in 1810 he founded the first research university. Historically, the notion of a university where research and teaching took place under one roof and were embodied in one role, the professor, was new and had ramifications for very different national systems worldwide—from Scandinavia through to Latin America and Japan. Today’s highly respected American research universities, which in many ways serve as a role model, are in fact based on the fundamental principles of the German university of the nineteenth century. Consequently, histories of the German higher education system fill whole libraries, and in international comparative research on national higher education systems the worldwide significance and appeal of German universities in the nineteenth and early twentieth century are just as indisputable as top American universities today (Ben-David 1991; Clark 1983; Rothblatt and Wittrock 2006).

While in the past the systematic study and description of the German system was a great source of inspiration for analyzing and shaping higher education systems internationally, more recently the German system appears to be only relevant for historians. Especially at the end of the twentieth century the German system was seen as *passé*. Research described it as a system that “had fallen into oblivion” (Keck 1993, 145), while other systems in Europe, but also those in the United States and Australia, appeared much better suited to overcome the rapid changes the various higher education systems were exposed to. This includes the extraordinary growth, expansion, and dynamics of higher education systems leading to the integration of ever-increasing numbers of people into the system and a fundamental change to the previously elite status of higher education. At the same time, national higher education systems and their institutions have been subjected to a comprehensive process of reform over the last two or three decades. We only have to think of the Bologna Process, changes to external and internal governance structures or the increasing relevance of competition. As Germany is clearly a “latecomer” in terms of these processes in international comparison, it is hardly surprising that of

the hundreds of monographs on the history of the German higher education system, there is not one comprehensive topical monograph about recent developments in this system. Therefore, the aim of this book is to describe and analyze recent developments in the quantitative and structural configuration of the German system, its governance and organization structures, the social composition of groups at higher education institutions and the related aspect of equality of opportunity for an international audience.¹

The book is also a reaction to growing international interest in the German system in recent years. The increasing internationalization across all levels of the system, the Excellence Initiative in research and decisions to cease charging tuition fees despite the rapid rise in the student population have made the German higher education system relevant and fascinating again, not only for historians, but also for those interested in contemporary developments.

Before we present the contents of the book, we would first like to introduce some core assumptions that underlie this publication.

Firstly, and most essentially, we take it for granted that academic curiosity, impartiality and scientific detachment are fundamental requirements for being able to portray the German higher education system as accurately as possible. It has not always been easy to have the German higher education system as an object of study when we, the authors, are a part of this, teaching and researching at a German university. As a metaphor for our position let us take Edgar Allen Poe's "A Descent into the Maelström". Here, Poe recounts how a fisherman frees himself from a whirlpool on the high seas although his two brothers in the boat die. Despite his desperation, the fisherman escapes because his detached curiosity enables him to fathom the peculiarities of the whirlpool. Our situation is nowhere near as dramatic. However, it is important that we also approach the subject of our deliberations with detached curiosity. Only in this way can we fathom the peculiarities of the change processes occurring in the higher education system and its institutions. This detached perspective provides us with insights into the "whirlpool" of higher education developments, insights that remain hidden to the committed perspective of the activist—either as engaged advocate or opponent of a development.

Secondly, we argue that the study of developments in German higher education needs to include international, not just national, processes. Current reforms and system dynamics can only be understood within a framework of the broader, international and global context the German system is embedded in. This means both taking account of international and global developmental

¹The book is based on a German book from 2016 that provides an introduction to research on higher education (Hüther and Krücken 2016). The English edition has been brought up to date, reworked and expanded in some parts but reduced in others. The goals of our editing were to more fully explain certain contextual conditions to an international audience and to shift emphasis from introductory explanations to highlighting newer developments in the German higher education system. Consequently, there are considerable differences between the German and English editions, resulting in two very different books. It should be noted that German quotations have been translated.

trends and also using international comparisons to embed and classify the German higher education system in a broader setting.

Our third core assumption is that in order to analyze and understand contemporary social structures and processes, we need to see how they are embedded in historical developments. This is particularly the case with the German higher education system and its institutions because the great success of German universities in the past has had a significant impact on current developments. This means that expectations or demands regarding social change and higher education reforms do not directly lead to comprehensive changes, but have to be translated into a specific context that itself is characterized by previous developments. Therefore, we will be referring to historical conditions throughout the book in order to understand current developments.

Fourthly, we need theories and we will be drawing on them. Relevant theories may refer to both higher education institutions and higher education systems. We use these theories to generate abstractions beyond the specific circumstance at hand. Moreover, theoretical knowledge that goes beyond higher education is necessary—to deal with questions of societal development, forms of governance and the organization of complex systems, for example—in order to abstract and classify knowledge related to higher education institutions and systems.

Fifthly, data and appropriate empirical methods are a further element we use to gain objectivity in describing the development of the German higher education system and classifying this in terms of international and global change processes. It is important for us to constantly reflect on the methods employed to generate our data and to explore the data's strengths and weaknesses.

Finally, our approach is unavoidably interdisciplinary. As sociologists, drawing on our specialist knowledge in the study of the German system and its recent developments is inexorable. However, the social scientific perspective we have adopted is broader and also takes account of politics and economics, history and law, and psychology and education. In addition, knowledge of transdisciplinary research areas such as science studies and organizational research also play an important role in this book.

Based on these core assumptions, the book describes the latest developments in the German higher education system and in higher education institutions from a variety of perspectives that should provide a holistic picture.

We start in Chap. 2 with an overview of intentional attempts to change, i.e. reform, the German higher education system. We show that over the last 20 years reform efforts have occurred on a variety of levels in the German higher education system. We also show that these efforts are tied to general social change—not just in the German system, but in many other higher education systems. Here, we want to make clear that developments in the German higher education system are embedded in a transnational framework. In all the following chapters the effects of these reforms for the development of the German higher education system are a main theme.

Our following detailed descriptions of recent developments in the German higher education system are organized along three frequently used analytical levels in the social sciences: the macro, the meso and the micro level. Chapter 3 describes developments at the macro or system level of the German system. Chapters 4 and 5 deal with developments at the meso- or institutional level (governance, organization) and Chaps. 6 and 7 focus on the micro level. Groups consisting of individual actors (students, academics, administrators) are seen as micro level elements here. The developments at each level are not at all independent of each other, but heavily connected or intertwined. Therefore, in the course of the book we will also point to the connections between recent developments at the three different levels.

Chapter 3 highlights developments at the macro level of the German system and describes changes in the quantitative and structural configuration. This not only includes the massive expansion in higher education in recent years, but also the expansion of research capacities in the German higher education system that cannot solely be explained by the increase in the student population. The impact of these two processes—the increase in student numbers and the expansion of research capacity—on the differentiation and funding of the German higher education system is a further focal point of this chapter.

In Chap. 4 we turn to developments at the meso level. Here we deal with governance structures of German higher education institutions. As in other countries, the development towards new public management is particularly important for Germany. To increase the analytical depth of our description we will first explore the fundamentals of the concept of governance—in particular, the functioning of various governance mechanisms. In a second step we will then use the Triangle of Coordination and the Governance Equalizer to present and observe two key governance typologies for higher education institutions. This allows us to classify German governance structures and to systematically follow recent developments. Later on in the chapter, we will describe research findings on the impact of change on governance structures in Germany.

Chapter 5 also focuses on changes at the meso level. But instead of applying the governance perspective to German higher education institutions, we analyze them through the lens of different organizational approaches. Through the use of different organizational approaches we are again looking to increase the analytical depth of our deliberations and to embed them in theory. Firstly, therefore, we present a simple model of organizations and transfer this to (German) higher education. In a second step, we look at organizational neo-institutionalism as a general theory of organizations and present selected studies on German higher education that use this approach.

Afterwards, we look at three dominant organizational descriptions of higher education institutions—loose coupling, professional organization and organized anarchies. These three approaches are applied to German higher education in two steps. First, a specific organizational feature of German higher education is described in detail for each of the three approaches. In terms of loose coupling,

we explore the dominant position of chairs in German higher education and show that, in comparison with higher education institutions in other countries, the proportions and elements that are either loosely or tightly coupled are different. In the professional perspective we focus on organizational effects arising through the scientific and teaching freedom guaranteed by the German constitution. In the light of these freedoms, we show that the position of professors at German higher education institutions is different to that of professors in other countries. The specific aspect of German higher education we highlight with the perspective of organized anarchies is the historical mixture of decision-making principles of the university of professors, group and managerial universities. Finally, we apply the three organizational perspectives on German higher education to discussing the organizational structures the various reform efforts are attempting to change.

In Chap. 6 we switch to the micro level and present research findings and developments in the German higher education system relating to individual actors and related groups of actors embedded in the macro and meso levels. We start by looking at students, considering among other things their choice of study program, the reasons behind and impact of dropping out, and their transition to working life. Academics form the second group of actors. Here, we will be dealing with the various levels of the German career system and with research on the factors that contribute to a successful academic career in Germany. The third and final group of actors is the administrative staff at higher education institutions. Here we reflect on developments in the qualifications of these actors and ask whether a new profession—that of higher education management—has developed in Germany.

In Chap. 7 we also deal with the micro level of the German higher education system. Here we focus on the issue of equal opportunities in the German higher education system with regard to the groups of actors we analyzed before. This allows for closer linkages to previous chapters, in particular to the analysis in Chap. 6, but also by relating the macro and micro level of analysis more explicitly to each other. In terms of gender equality, we will be looking at developments with regards to students, academics and administrative staff. In terms of social background, our deliberations focus on both students and academics. Given the shortage of data, however, this is not possible for administrative staff.

The book concludes with some summarizing reflections on the recent developments it describes. In recapitulating each chapter we try to answer the question whether we are witnessing radical or more incremental changes to the German higher education system over the last two decades.

Although the book does provide a broad overview of developments in the German higher education system, we do not claim to comprehensively cover all developments. The book sets priorities and has made selections. Although these priorities and selections can be justified and arguments provided, it ultimately remains a choice made by the authors. The book primarily deals with developments at structural level, while developments in teaching processes or in research remain

marginal. This is mainly because we are attempting to present to our international readers the significant developments that have taken place at the structural level since the mid-1990s.

We would also like to clarify some terminology. Throughout large sections of the book we use the concept of the higher education institution to include the two main types of higher education institutions in Germany: universities and universities of applied sciences. We do this to make clear linguistically that our focus is on the higher education system and its reforms. In doing so, we are not arguing for these two types of higher education institutions to be placed on an equal footing: at various points in the book, and with regard to various issues, we highlight key differences between them. It cannot be denied that in research on German higher education there is a clear focus on universities—especially in respect of governance and organization, and the group of academics. Nonetheless, we have decided by and large to use the concept of higher education institution to avoid any additional confusion.

Secondly, throughout the book we discuss “transintentional” effects of reforms and developments in the German system. The concept is related to Merton’s sociology of unanticipated consequences of intended social action (Merton 1936). Enlarging on Merton, however, we are not so much looking at individual decision makers who carry out actions with surprising (“unanticipated”) results. Instead, higher education is a field of action comprising chains of action and process dynamics where it is difficult to attribute change to any one decision maker. Equally, the broad and critical discussion on higher education policy argues that although the surprise of non-intended effects may well apply to individual actors, it does not apply to the same extent for the whole system in which such effects may even be critically anticipated at an early stage.²

We would also like to thank the people who have helped and supported us in the writing of this book. Important information came from Guido Bünstorf, Anita Engels, Choni Flöther, Susanne Höckelmann, Thomas Kailer, Lars Müller and Elke Wild. Our special thanks go to Anna Kosmützky, Christiane Rittgerott and Peter Maassen who read the whole manuscript and provided many invaluable comments. We would like to thank Michael Alger for translating and Katherine Bird for the final editing of the book.

²For further details of the concept of transintentionality see Greshoff et al. (2003) and Krücken (2013) in respect of higher education.

References

- Ben-David, J. (1991). *Scientific growth. Essays on the social organization and ethos of science*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Clark, B. R. (1983). *The higher education system. Academic organization in cross-national perspective*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Greshoff, R., Kneer, G., & Schimank, U. (Eds.). (2003). *Die Transintentionalität des Sozialen. Eine vergleichende Betrachtung klassischer und moderner Sozialtheorien*. Wiesbaden: Westdeutscher Verlag.
- Hüther, O., & Krücken, G. (2016). *Hochschulen. Fragestellungen, Ergebnisse und Perspektiven der sozialwissenschaftlichen Hochschulforschung*. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag.
- Keck, O. (1993). The national system for technical innovation in Germany. In R. R. Nelson (Ed.), *National innovation systems: A comparative analysis* (pp. 115–157). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Krücken, G. (2013). Die Universität – ein rationaler Mythos? *Beiträge zur Hochschulforschung*, 35(4), 82–101.
- Merton, R. K. (1936). The unanticipated consequences of purposive social action. *American Sociological Review*, 1(6), 894–904. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2084615>.
- Rothblatt, S., & Wittrock, B. (Eds.). (2006). *The European and American university since 1800. Historical and sociological essays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.