

## Chapter 8

# Summarizing Reflections—Stability and Change in German Higher Education

We have described and discussed a myriad of changes that have taken place at the macro, the meso and the micro level of the German higher education system over the last 20 years. In the respective chapters of this book we have embedded each of these developments in theory in order to lend greater depth to our analysis. We have also shown that, on the one hand, these reforms are embedded in transnational discourse and developments; on the other hand, however, that they are strongly influenced by national traditions and structures. Before we begin exploring how these changes are to be assessed overall, we should once again review the developments we described in each of the chapters.

Chapter 2 first presented a variety of areas in which reforms—i.e., intentional attempts at change—have taken place in the last few decades. The breadth of reforms we described show that, on the political plane, there has been a strong desire to change the German higher education system since the end of the 1990s. As a result, the higher education system has been put under pressure to change—whether in respect of teaching, research, or in terms of personnel, funding or governance structures. We believe that these wide-ranging reforms have not necessarily followed a master plan or a coherent concept. Instead, these are rather disconnected reforms that, in part, are contradictory. In addition, the federal system of German higher education consisting of 16 states with 16 different higher education acts hardly makes reform from a single mold possible.

The disconnection can be seen between the five reform areas we discussed. For instance, one goal of the governance reforms was to strengthen managerial control over academics and to make them more dependent on funding decisions of their institutions. In other words, the reforms tried in part to construct universities as bounded, goal-oriented actors (“complete organizations”). However, the Excellence Initiative as part of the reforms in research had the opposite effect. The cluster building efforts of the Excellence Initiative in many cases transcend organizational boundaries because cooperation between universities and also between universities and non-university research institutions was one objective.

Furthermore, the funding of these clusters made them independent from the funding allocated by their institutions. The Excellence Initiative therefore established new power structures that transcend organizational boundaries and made at least some academics more independent from their institutions.

The disconnection of reforms is also obvious within individual reform areas. One example is the striking differences in how NPM was formally implemented in the 16 states. Take the boards of governors, as part of the external guidance mechanism: In one state we find no boards, in some states they are strictly advisory units and in other states they are, at least at the formal level, powerful steering actors.

Chapter 3 examined the development of the quantitative and structural configuration of the German higher education system. At the quantitative level, two partially independent developments were revealed: a huge expansion of the student population and a considerable increase in research personnel. Since roughly 2005, the German higher education system has been in a phase of accelerated growth. However, despite this expansion, first-time entry rates are still below the OECD average, which is due in part to the extensively developed and highly legitimized vocational education and training system.

Developments in terms of differentiation in the German higher education system have been somewhat incremental in nature, in spite of this huge expansion in student numbers. The binary structure of higher education, consisting of universities and universities of applied sciences that has existed since the 1960s has to date been fundamentally retained. Nonetheless, cracks have started to appear at a number of places in this structure. One such crack has been the development of dual, or work/study, programs that combine occupational training with higher education study that are more representative in structure of a stratified system. Another crack—this time more in the direction of a unified system—is the academic drift of universities of applied sciences toward universities. This process has gathered pace through the introduction of bachelor/master degrees and the growth in the number of research projects at universities of applied sciences.

It should also be noted that the German system is still dominated by public higher education institutions. Although we are witnessing a purely quantitative growth in the significance of private higher education institutions in Germany, the legitimacy of the private sector remains low. Change tendencies can be observed in terms of differentiation by reputation. Whereas until the end of the twentieth century, the dominant assumption in Germany was that there were no relevant differences between higher education institutions in the university and university of applied sciences sectors, this assumption is now coming under significant pressure. Global rankings and the national Excellence Initiative have turned differences in reputation into a subject of heated debate. We can still assume that although differences in reputation in the German system are being increasingly discussed, no stable reputation hierarchy—largely recognized and eliciting concentration effects—has yet formed. At the same time, however, the assumption that all universities and all universities of applied sciences perform at an equal level is increasingly regarded as fiction.

The last key point in the analysis of the quantitative and structural configuration was funding. As before, the state is by far the largest funder of higher education. However, public money is increasingly being coupled with documented performance by the higher education institutions and research funds are increasingly provided on the basis of competitive proceedings. Moreover, higher education institutions receive global budgets and can thus decide for themselves how they want to allocate the money provided. As radical as this may at first sound and as strong as developments towards accountability, competition and financial autonomy have been embedded in general transnational trends in higher education, actual structural changes have only been incremental. Performance indicators that have been introduced have hardly led to a shift in the flows of funds between higher education institutions; the growth in the significance of third-party funding began back in the 1980s and has been a continuous, drawn-out process. In addition, in some places the global budgets are not really variable—when the ministries prescribe how many professors higher education institutions can employ and when target and performance agreements determine that this or that unit within an institution of higher education has to be funded further.

Chapter 4 dealt with developments with respect to governance structures at German higher education institutions. These clearly show the strong orientation towards globally dominating NPM ideas at the discursive level. In Germany, the decline of detailed state regulations and the influence of academic committees, as well as the increase in external guidance, internal hierarchy and competition all play a key role. However, this strong orientation towards NPM cannot be found in the legal regulations of the individual states. Instead, we have a wide variety of hybrid governance regimes in the states between the traditional German regime of governance and the NPM ideal type. This also ties in to our observation that, in an international comparison, reforms at the formal level in Germany have been somewhat moderate. And when we take account of the level of practical decision-making processes at higher education institutions, reforms have been even more moderate. All available studies show that formal decision-making processes often are, or have to be, circumvented simply because the institutional safeguards for formally envisaged decision-making processes are not in place. This leads to the formation of “kitchen cabinets” and to a shift in decision-making to opaque informal structures. It would therefore be wrong to presume that we are experiencing a comprehensive and direct alignment of German governance structures to the NPM ideal type: at best we might be witnessing a fundamental alignment at the discursive level. However, at the level created by higher education law and still stronger at the level of practical decision-making processes in higher education institutions, we show that change is somewhat limited.

Chapter 5 explored the organization structures at German higher education institutions, confirming and expanding on our observations from Chap. 4. Our discussions focused first and foremost on specific properties of higher education institutions, especially German higher education institutions from an organizational sociology perspective. We can see that traditional concepts to characterize higher education institutions in international organization research continue to apply to

Germany. Here, as before, we were able to describe and discuss more recent change processes on the one hand, with the stability of certain structures becoming visible on the other. This includes the chair structure—unlike in other countries, the center of power at German higher education institutions is not the department, but the individual professor, i.e., the chair. This structure is supported by the freedom of teaching and research, protected by the constitution, which further strengthens the dominant position of the professor in the organizational structure. This special feature of German higher education institutions in particular is a key factor in explaining why discourse, formal regulations and actual practice in relation to NPM ideas are at variance in Germany, when compared to higher education institutions in other countries. In addition, we also showed that this simple notion—that you only have to tackle the central position of professors in order to strengthen the change processes at organization level—is not easy to implement in Germany. This is not only due to the fact that we are dealing with structural properties that have proven to be highly stable for more than 150 years, but that these structures have been institutionally safeguarded by constitutional norms. Nonetheless, we do find reforms in decision-making structures at the organizational level. However, these are not characterized by radical changes in decision-making principles, but rather by a mixture of various decision-making principles that have developed historically. We thus find a “wild” hybridization of the principles of the university of professors, of the group university and the managerial university that have arisen at various times.

Using these descriptions and discussions as a basis, we were also able to show that there are indicators pointing to the development of German higher education institutions as complete organizations, breaking with previous organizational models. However, if we take an overall picture—especially in terms of organizational practice—we can clearly see that the construction of complete organizations is primarily a discursive “construction”. Be that as it may, in comparison this model plays much less of a role at the level of formal regulations and practice.

Chapter 6 focused on various actors and groups of actors—students, academics and administrative staff—describing and discussing current developments. In terms of students, we began by taking a look at higher education entrants, considered data on students who dropped out of the system and examined the entry of higher education graduates into the labor market. Our analysis of higher education entrants noted a fundamental continuity of attitudes and behavioral patterns. The decision to study at higher education level is based on a wide range of intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors. The choice of program is primarily an intrinsic one, while regional mobility in the choice of higher education institution is relatively low. Despite the highly explicit political goal of reducing student dropout rates through the introduction of bachelor/master degree programs, these rates have not diminished over time. Studies reveal a highly complex picture of influencing factors: students who drop out early suffer from problems of achievement and self-motivation, whereas funding issues often arise with those dropping out later in their program. Again in contrast to political goals, the overall duration of a program of study has not been reduced through the introduction of bachelor/master

programs. This is due in part to the fact that the standard degree is not the 3 year bachelor degree, but the 2 year master degree directly after the bachelor program. The labor market in Germany has absorbed graduates in a relatively uncomplicated fashion. This is remarkable both in view of the huge expansion of the system and the associated significant increase in graduates, and in comparison with other countries.

We examined academic staff from the doctoral level through to professor and presented the academic career path as an ideal model of phases. The presentation of the “phase model” as it relates to Germany is important because career paths in national higher education systems can be considerably different and special paths that have evolved historically play a very important role here. In the doctoral phase, we find a rise in the significance of structured programs. However, the master-pupil model with its individual doctorate process continues to dominate. It is also clear that the doctorate enjoys a different position in the German labor market system than in other countries. A PhD is not only necessary to advance one’s academic career, it also has considerable benefits in other labor market segments. This explains why a large proportion of PhD graduates leave the academic system once they have their degrees in their pocket. Whereas traditionally the post-doctoral habilitation was a prerequisite to a position as a full professor, its significance has tailed off with the introduction of the junior professorship. However, the political goal of abolishing the habilitation has not been achieved. And the objective of making academic careers more predictable and safe by introducing the junior professorship has not succeeded. As before, only full professors are employed on a permanent basis in the German system, and the considerable expansion of academic positions below the level of professor has not led to an increase in professorships. One hundred years ago, Max Weber described the academic career in Germany as a “hazard”. Not only does this still apply today, but the situation has become exacerbated in the last 20 years.

In terms of administrative staff, we have seen an expansion in higher administrative positions with a reduction in the number of lower positions. Likewise, a wide range of new demanding positions in higher education administration has been created in recent years. This includes positions in quality management in teaching and research, public relations and the transfer of academic knowledge. In addition, the role of chancellor, the head of higher education administration, has changed considerably in recent years. Despite these changes, there are no strong signs of the development of a new higher education management profession in Germany.

Overall, the details presented in Chap. 6 reveal a familiar pattern: although we see a myriad of changes at different levels, these can normally be viewed as incremental/gradual developments and not as radical changes in direction.

In Chap. 7, we dealt with the question of equal opportunity in the German higher education system. As a cross-cutting issue, equal opportunity is highly relevant for higher education research and development. Our evaluation distinguishes between issues of gender and of social background. We can see both forms of inequality in higher education, but again, there have been interesting developments. Higher education entrants are roughly equally male and female students. Women study

more often at universities than at universities of applied sciences. This is particularly related to the range of subjects available at both types of higher education institution—the humanities are almost exclusive to universities, while engineering is a major department at universities of applied sciences. In the course of an academic career we find a decreasing proportion of women although there have been changes in recent years: the proportion of women has risen at all career stages albeit not in equal numbers. The most critical phase is that between the PhD and the habilitation. While there are only slight gender differences in the numbers of doctoral students and those appointed as professors following the habilitation, the phase in between plays a key role in the decreasing proportion of women in the German system. An analysis of administrative staff reveals a significant feminization of highly qualified administrative staff. However, the top level of administration, the chancellor, is still by and large the preserve of men.

As before, issues of social background play an essential role in the German system. While the inclusion of women can be viewed to a large extent as a successful process in terms of equal opportunity, this cannot be said in terms of the broad inclusion of all social strata. Social background is still crucial both for acquiring the qualification to study as well as for taking up a program of study. This is particularly the case for universities, whereas the social basis at universities of applied sciences is much broader. There are only a few studies on advanced academic careers for Germany. Those available reveal that social background is a factor at all steps on the career ladder in Germany.

If we summarize the findings of all chapters, it can be seen that we are witnessing a myriad of changes in all the areas we investigated—quantitative and structural configuration, governance, organization, actors and groups of actors, equal opportunity—that can only be understood in connection with transnational developments that go beyond Germany. However, for each of these areas, the more recent developments we have analyzed have not led to radical changes. Instead, they are embedded in national traditions and structures. But before we draw the conclusion that the German system has hardly, and at best only incrementally, changed in the last 20 years we would like to take three points into consideration.

Firstly, it is not possible to make a final appraisal of the developments described here. Developments have not been finalized. As a result, the long-term effects of the reforms and changes described cannot yet be comprehensively understood and evaluated. The Excellence Initiative is a good example of this. It is not possible to adequately judge, even 10 years after the program began, whether the goal of achieving a sustained increase in the quality of top research in Germany has been met. The same applies in terms of stratification by reputation and its consequences for the German system. This necessary proviso also includes the possibility that today's "incremental developments" may well turn into tomorrow's "radical change".

Secondly, maybe the strength of change should not be measured by the extent of radical changes in individual areas, but by the possible interplay of many smaller changes in many areas. In other words, possible emergent processes may arise through the interplay of the many reforms and changes—from this perspective, the

whole is then significantly more than the sum of its parts. The historical path dependencies we have noted time and again in our analyses can be broken up by cumulative, individual changes that may at first glance appear small, but still may trigger radical path changes. Such emergent processes—as we are witnessing in Europe at present in other aspects of society, such as multiparty democracy or in terms of the European integration project—do not lend themselves to prediction and are much more difficult to appraise than the scope of individual changes.

Thirdly, our appraisals have primarily been focusing on analyzing change at the structural level. However, in doing so we might have tended to underestimate the rather latent and long-term impact of ideas, attitudes and perceptions that we have not given prominence to. Cognitive and structural levels are certainly not congruent. The rather high level of persistence at the structural level we have worked out may well go hand in hand with a radical change in a mindset perceived by actors and observers of the German higher education system. As members of the system we have been analyzing, we have noticed that the rather incremental changes in structures we having been emphasizing do not “feel” in any way incremental—the system feels so radically different than 20 years ago.