



Volume 10. One Germany in Europe, 1989 – 2009

A Neoliberal Commentator Demands the Unfettering of German Universities (August 5/12, 2002)

Detlef Müller-Böling, the director of the Center for Higher Education Development in Gütersloh, advocates freeing German universities from their bureaucratic fetters in order to make them more intellectually innovative and internationally competitive.

Free the Universities from their “Fetters”

Since the mid-1990s, various reforms have been discussed at Germany’s institutions of higher education, laws have been amended, and new instruments for university governance have been tested. These are largely sensible approaches, but they often do not dovetail and coordinate with each other. In debates on (higher education) policy, individual measures keep being fashioned into panaceas that will supposedly make the universities competitive and sustainable. Junior professors, performance-based salaries for professors, global budgets, and tuition fees are today’s catchwords.

These measures can only be effective if they are implemented on the basis of a holistic view of both higher education as an institution and the higher education system. The challenges facing the higher education system – growing student numbers, international competition, rapid scientific progress, budget shortages, and much more – demand that universities be given greater discretionary power. Therefore, the guiding model of the reform should be an “unfettered university,” as both the goal and frame of reference. The corporative autonomy of the university as an institution needs to occupy a central place and needs to be asserted, both against partisan and group interests within the institution itself and against excessive attempts by the state to control it.

The university needs to be understood as an individual actor, as a corporate entity whose discretionary power and capacity to govern within a competitive system need to be strengthened.

Corporative Autonomy

Based on such a concept, the need for reform is apparent in almost all areas of the university, from university admissions to university funding, management, and organizational structures, from personnel issues to quality assurance and strategy building.

The goal of strengthening the corporative autonomy of institutions of higher education gives rise, in particular, to their need for autonomy in financial, organizational, and personnel matters. Organizational autonomy requires new management structures that reorganize the policy-making process within the university system and as well as its relationship to the state. Therefore, part of running a university is fulfilling the central management task of leading the university in accordance with a strategic and operative model.

In the context of profile-building, all members of the university system need to participate in defining special focal points, the development of which can only occur if resources are allocated internally for this purpose. This, in turn, is only possible within the framework of a global budget. Linking professors' salaries to their performance can only work as an instrument for profile-building if the universities have decision-making powers and discretionary latitude.

State control of details – for example, the setting of a uniform, fixed calculation for incentive bonuses – can only have a counterproductive effect. In order to satisfy the principle of cost effectiveness, universities need to be able to assess ensuing costs in relation to (by and large academic) achievements and to use indicators as the basis for decision making. Numerous universities in Germany are already in the process of introducing cost-performance calculations and establishing academic controlling.

Profile-building by individual institutions leads to greater task and quality differentiation in the system as a whole, so that competition results. Sensible competition for quality in research and teaching demands transparency with respect to the following: the achievements of universities, universities' ability to freely select students, and students' ability to freely choose universities. A centralized allocation of university admission slots cannot take quality and profile criteria into sufficient account. Demand-oriented university funding in accordance with the principle "funding follows the student"¹ and socially tolerable tuition fees mean that the competition for students will involve financial incentives.

Internationality was always an important characteristic of scholarship and therefore of universities. In the age of globalization, ensuring that educational offerings are geared toward international expectations and that courses of study are structurally compatible is one crucial task that must be resolved both at the level of the individual college and among university systems. It is imperative that internationally recognized bachelor's and master's degree programs be introduced.

Use of new media – virtuality – will become an essential competitive factor in the achievement of academic excellence in research and teaching. The development of an adequate strategy for the utilization of new media (which, by the way, is more than just web-supported distance learning

¹ According to this principle, the federal state in which a student acquires his university-qualification certificate (high school diploma) pays as sum to the federal state in which the student attends university – trans.

and also includes many forms of face-to-face e-learning) places high demands on overall university management. Such a strategy will become a university's chief profile-building element.

All reforms must ultimately be measured against the primacy of academic standards. Therefore, in a decentralized and competitive higher education system, one central leadership task of university management is developing and guaranteeing academic quality, the attainment of which demands comprehensive quality management. In addition to various forms of evaluation, the introduction of long-term career prospects for people working in academia is another key instrument of quality management. This is only possible in conjunction with autonomy in personnel matters.

Autonomy and deregulation by no means imply that the state should withdraw from its responsibility for the system of higher education; rather, it presumes a transformed understanding of the tasks [of the higher education system]. Government policy defines the goals and the necessary framework conditions for the universities as they compete against each other.

Source: Detlef Müller-Böling, "Die Hochschule aus ihren 'Fesseln' lösen" ["Free the Universities from their 'Fetters'"], *Das Parlament*, August 5/12, 2002.

Translation: Allison Brown