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Strategic Responses to the German Excellence Initiative

A case study of Berlin Humboldt University

*Master thesis by
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Background

My motivation was to understand...

- ...what kind of organizational change is taking place in universities
- ...whether this change can be attributed to external factors (like the Excellence Initiative)
- ...whether universities can be considered strategic actors

Institutional theory

- Takes into account institutional norms and traditions
- Helps explaining change that is not explainable from a rationalist perspective

Research questions

1. What organizational changes took place within the university after the introduction of the Excellence Initiative?
 - What changes took place in the university's internal governance after the introduction of the Excellence Initiative?
 - What changes took place with respect to the university's human resource policies after the introduction of the Excellence Initiative?
 - What changes took place with respect to the university's research profile after the introduction of the Excellence Initiative?
2. What role does the institutional leadership play in triggering these changes?
3. To what extent are these changes influenced by institutional forces?

Research design

- Case study of Humboldt University Berlin
 - Interesting case: received funding in Ex I ni Institutional Strategy in third round after having been rejected in the first two rounds
- Qualitative approach
- 10 Interviews with employees who have been in contact with application or implementation of Excellence Initiative at HU
 - 6 academics in leading positions
 - 3 academics not in leading position (2 professors/1 Mittelbau)
 - 1 administrator
- Document analysis (institutional strategy, annual reports, press announcements etc.)
- Triangulation

Findings

Question 1: What organizational changes took place within the university after the introduction of the Excellence Initiative?

Examples of (strategic) responses to Excellence Initiative

- Development and implementation of Institutional Strategy
- Establishment of Integrative Research Centres reduced fragmentation of institution
- Changes in informal communication culture
- Changed perception of the role of university leadership and institutional identity
- Triggered competitiveness within university and willingness to invest more time in tasks beneficial to whole institution

Findings (continued)

Question 2: What role does the institutional leadership play in triggering these changes?

- Legitimization of strengthened university leadership
- Increased strategic planning is seen as a necessity to survive in the increased competition for external funding
- Increased number of top-down decisions
- “Institutional Strategy” helps leadership to convey meaning and to motivate (internal) stakeholders

Findings (continued)

Question 3: To what extent are these changes influenced by institutional forces?

- Strategic responses are limited by institutional forces
- Bottom-heavy governance structure at HU have slowed down initial organizational responses to Excellence Initiative
- Most decisions are still dependent on a consensus in University Senate (strong status-quo orientation)
- Inflexibility of legal frameworks limit room to maneuver
- Strong institutional norms of academic freedom and trust between institution and academics limit adaptation to new competitive practices
- Some changes slowly emerged and could be identified as strategic responses in retrospective

Conclusion

- Contribution to the literature on organizational change in general, and on impacts of Excellence Initiative in particular
- Excellence Initiative seems to have served its purpose: more strategic and competitive institutions
- Nonetheless, strong institutional forces are at play
- Open question whether changes are sustainable or just a temporary response

Upcoming paper

Esterhazy & Fumasoli (in work) *Institutionalizing strategic behavior in higher education: the case of a German flagship university*

Research Questions:

- How is competitiveness emerging in higher education institutions?
- Are changes in competitiveness likely to be sustainable beyond the immediate impact of a policy instrument?
- Empirical investigation on case study of HU
- Operationalization of competitiveness?
 - Competitiveness as socially constructed? (Hasse & Krücken, 2013)
- Methodological approach by Colyvas & Powell (2006)?
 - Tracing indicators of institutionalization in documents and interviews

Upcoming paper (continued)

Expected findings:

Alternative 1 (March & Olsen, 1983; Simmel, 1903)

- Institution gets ‘socialized’ into acting strategically by taking part in competition
- Slow initial response, very much based on path-dependency
- Learning process takes place, organizational changes are likely to stay (sustainable)

Alternative 2 (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Hasse & Krücken, 2013)

- Institution complies to competition in order to keep legitimization
- Quick ceremonial response (“window dressing”)
- Decoupling of formal and informal structures
- Strategic behavior is unlikely to get institutionalized & will bounce back to old behavior after external pressure is gone

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