

Theses On Status Quo And Future Challenges Of The German System Of Higher Education

Prof. Dr. Hans-Uwe Erichsen
Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster

I. Talking about the status quo and future challenges of German higher education is not possible without considering the developments in Europe. Both the programmes of the EU and the so-called Bologna-process are leading to a loss of national sovereignty in the field of higher education. From a historical perspective, this is not a new development. However, it underlines the eroding position of national states.

II. It is common knowledge that along with the Catholic Church, the university is one of the oldest institutions in the world. The ideas, which shape and feature the university, have been laid down in the “magna charta universitatum” which has been signed by rectors of the European universities on the occasion of the 900th anniversary of the foundation of the University of Bologna. The declaration “The European Higher Education area“, which is very important for the recent and future development of the higher education sector and which was signed by the ministers of 29 European Countries on 19 June 1999 in Bologna, refers to the “magna charta universitatum”.

III. In Germany, universities and similar institutions fulfil a constitutional task. Universities not only contribute to the qualifications and personal development of people, but also their work is essential

for the maintenance and stabilisation of democracy and its fundamental values regarding the promotion of culture. Universities fulfil this task by researching, teaching and studying.

IV. It is taken for granted that independence of research and teaching is an essential part of universities identity, and it has to be protected against interference by state or society. Therefore, an independent organisation and independent procedures of decision making are necessary. Today, there is a general consensus saying that the unity of research and teaching can only be partly realized by individuals. This concept only works for institutions as a whole.

A university is an institution where research and teaching is performed by scientists. At German universities, academics partly work on their own and partly work in an interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary network. In any case, it is important that there is a link between research and teaching. This is the precondition that mutual stimulation and scrutiny of results and contents take place.

V. What is essential to academic life, which is institutionalised at universities, is a highly qualified but also critical staff, who see themselves as and behave as members of a corporation. This should be reflected in the way of creating decision-making bodies. When it comes to making decisions about academic affairs, the corporative organisation should be capable of considering plurality and of securing quality standards.

VI. It is a university's duty, and its aim to contribute to the solution of social problems. Thus, universities analyse social developments and deal

critically but also constructively with these problems. It is the university's task to act as a driving force and to give new impetus for social developments. It goes without saying that a university should deal with social needs, put questions on a scientific level and contribute to their solution. However, it has to be stated that in Germany, there is a lack of communication and interaction between the fields of politics, society and science . This led to a kind of distrust between the different actors, which should be reduced by their contributions .

VII. In the current discussions on the future of universities, politicians and representatives of the economy consistently suggest the adoption of economic principles for improving the efficiency and effectiveness of universities. However, quarterly financial statements can not be an adequate way of measuring the performance of universities. It is important that universities stand by their own culture and maintain it. This is the only way a synergetic, productive and beneficial communication and interaction between university, society and economy is possible. The university culture does not aim to make profit, but is characterised by a cognitive interest, curiosity and a certain ethos connected to immaterial values. The function of money at universities should be stimulation not motivation. Thus, the consistently repeated complaints at German universities about the insufficiency of funding should also be understood as alarming signals concerning the self-image and the culture at German universities.

VIII. The current debate on the development of universities in Germany and in Europe is dominated by the awareness of the globalisation of competition

including the globalisation of a university's area of influence. Keywords characterising the current discussion are, for example, autonomy or rather decentralisation; the establishment of a certain profile and a certain main focus; securing, increasing and controlling the quality of research, teaching and management; funding of universities, especially by tuition fees; responsibility for improving the graduates' position on the labour market; the extent and the management of the demand for higher education, controlling the admittance to higher education, diversification, continuing education, significance and use of new media, ranking the degrees and accreditation, acceptance of exams and other university performances, internationalisation and mobility.

IX. Due to the increasing competition for public funding between different policy fields, the guaranteed funding for universities seems to be a thing of the past. Thus, there is increasing pressure on the universities to justify their need for public funding and they have to meet the requirements of public accountability.

X. There is general consent that the aim is not just to assure the quality and efficiency of research, teaching and studying, but also to increase and optimise them. It is almost common opinion in Europe that this aim cannot be achieved by top down and ex ante state governance. On the contrary, competition seems to be the right means for optimisation. Although universities already compete with each other for professors, additional public and private funding, and in some European countries also for students, this kind of competition does not have any immediate consequences. As long as the results of malpractice at

publicly funded universities are compensated by society, this kind of competition does not contribute to increasing efficiency. In order to reform the current system, which is not regulated by prices, public funding for research and teaching and salaries should be paid in relation to performance. This will lead to competition between universities and at universities between professors.

XI. Both the shortage of public resources and the necessity to be a top performer in order to be internationally compatible will have to lead to a concentration of one's strength. The concept of the universality of the arts and sciences within a university and the idea of comprehensive equality, which is especially popular in Germany, can no longer be realized. Due to the shortage of financial means and the increasing international competition, Universities will have to develop a special profile covering just a matching core of taught and research subjects. This is the only way to be able to compete internationally. However, a certain range of research and teaching fields has to persist and basic coverage of subjects is still necessary. These are the preconditions for interdisciplinary co-operation and thus for scientific progress, which is increasingly located at interfaces between different subjects. However, this means that the concept of universities, which are focused on just one subject, no longer prevails. In fact, mono-disciplinary universities, especially in the former socialist countries, have been reformed or resolved. It is worth mentioning that this concept of university is now being revived in the newly founded private universities in Germany and elsewhere, which are often characterised by just one discipline.

XII. A competitive system of higher education will be dominated by concentration, individuality, and established profiles of the different faculties and departments and thus of the whole university. There will be a stronger need for co-operation between different universities, not only within one country, but also across borders. This will be the most suitable way for securing the universality of the arts and sciences, the “universitas literarum et scientiarum”, and for satisfying social needs. This is not only a task for all universities of the country, but also for the state, which has to meet the overall responsibility as it is laid down in the German constitution.

XIII. The precondition for competition between universities and within universities, which would lead to increasing efficiency and quality, is that universities are made competitive. As competition is not possible when the products are not defined by the producers themselves, universities have to gain competence in determining their main focus in research and what they offer in the way of teaching, study, services and continuing education. Other necessary preconditions for increasing efficiency and effectiveness, are funding related to performance and transferring the responsibility for their budget to the universities themselves (keyword: lump-sum budget). In addition it would be necessary to reform their right to decide their own employ policy, which will have to consider a high level of flexibility, encourage and reward top performances and take the special conditions of research into account.

XIV. Furthermore, the universities must have the right to choose their students, or at least select the majority of them according, to their own criteria. This

is the best way to increase the profile and the focus points of a university.

XV. There are different legal forms that could guarantee autonomy. A legal form for state universities has to fulfil two preconditions: On the one hand the necessity of democratic legislation has to be respected and the overall responsibility of the state, especially the parliament's right to budget, has to persist. Agreements on performance and aims, and funding based on a certain formula are possible solutions. On the other hand universities need to be legal entities, including the right to own property.

In Germany, the current debate on the future of higher education is dominated by the idea of giving universities the legal form of foundations. This suggestion is an option, which presents the solution to some problems. However, it is not a patent remedy and can just be taken into account when there is a sufficient endowment. Although it is possible to gain enough capital during several years or even decades, foundations based on income or grants are not an improvement of the current situation.

The most preferable solution is to give universities the status of a full legally responsible public corporation with the skills of an employer and the ability to own property. Tasks originally fulfilled by the state, or by both the state and the university in cooperation, would be best fulfilled by an affiliated institution. Thus, academic affairs could be solved within corporate structures. Decisions about staff and equipment could be arranged hierarchically. Governmental and social control could be exercised by a university council.

It has to be stressed that the change of the form of organisation does not imply a creation of money: The state is not released from its constitutional duty of funding universities.

Additionally, the inner organisational structure of universities needs to be changed. It is no longer acceptable that decision-making and responsibility do not coincide. The consequences of malpractice should no longer be socialised.

XVI. The research performance of some German universities would have a good ranking in an international comparison. However, due to specialisation the last 30 years are characterised by a development towards fragmentation and separation of the different areas of research. Especially for the humanities and social sciences, this status quo has to be replaced by a new development towards intra-, inter-, and transdisciplinary communication and project-oriented co-operation.

Research has always had an international dimension, but with the rising use of modern means of information and communication technology, cross-border co-operation will increase. As requested in the declaration of Bologna, bi- and multinational research projects have to become a matter of course. Young academics should be obliged to gain parts of their qualifications abroad to become familiar with a different culture and civilisation and their influence on researching and teaching. It is rather important that the declaration of Bologna declares the mobility of teachers, scientists, and administrators to be desirable and promoted.

XVII. Universities have the task to prepare their students for their working life. There is a close connection between universities and the labour market: Although universities should not be affected by often-short cyclical changes in the labour market, their offer of courses should reflect long-term developments.

For classical disciplines such as law, medicine, engineering, and natural sciences the preparation for a job has always been a matter of course. This is now true for all subjects, which means that it has to be taken into account, that most of the students (85%) do not intend taking up an academic career. They have to be prepared for a job outside the university, without neglecting their capability for doing academic work.

XVIII. In the last decades, the situation in Germany and in the other member states of the EU, has been characterised by an essential increase in the demand for higher education. Since the 1960s, it is the joint aim of the governments of Western Europe to enable more people to get access to higher education. In the post-communist countries this development started later.

However, German universities and politicians reacted in a quantitative, and not in a qualitative, way to the increasing demand for higher education. This process included the demand for better funding. In contrast to other countries, the increase in funding did not correspond to the rising number of students. The result is a sustainable lack of financing at German universities.

XIX. The future development of the tertiary sector in Germany as in other European countries will

be, and has to be characterised by a high demand of higher education. Therefore, it is alarming that recently the proportion of German pupils who go to university after leaving school is sinking. However, there is a joint consensus, as was laid down in the declaration of Bologna, that it is a public responsibility to offer educational opportunities for as many as possible.

At the same time, there is the general consent that educational opportunities must vary, if not just 5% of an age group want to study, but up to 30% or even 50%. The heterogeneity of skills, talents, previous knowledge, interests, and affinities as well as the conditions of the labour market have to be taken into account. Thus, a diversified offer of courses is necessary. In addition to theoretical orientated courses, there have to be courses which are more productive and application-oriented.

For all types of courses, it must be guaranteed that both undergraduates and graduates are taught how to learn.

XX. The challenge of differentiation could be met by a diversification of institutions, as the German model with the establishment of Universities of Applied Science shows. In France and southern Europe another model can be found: Here, diversification takes place within the universities. The Sorbonne initiative and the declaration of Bologna were the starting point for an establishment of this model in other European countries.

The declaration of Bologna includes a commitment to a tiered system which should include two main cycles. If this concept is understood in the

right way it will provide a curricular challenge for European universities. It will only have consequences if the traditional contents and structures of courses are questioned, and if modular courses of study are established.

In the second half of the 1990s a poll initiated by the European Association of Universities and other Higher Education Institutions showed that in Europe there are more degrees and systems of study than countries. The overall picture of courses of study, degrees, and curricula is very complex and different. This diversity is a result of the different kind of schools which qualify for studying at university and of the differences in contents, structure, and the requirements of courses. Other reasons for the diversity are the different ways of access to university, the existence of tuition fees, and the different organisation of the university schedule ranging from annual courses and semesters to modules. Finally, the different structures, duration, number, and types of degrees, which are awarded, have to be taken into account.

In general, the first phase of the studies should be dominated by teaching the theoretical basics as well as the methods of the subject. According to the Sorbonne declaration, the second phase (MA) should be featured by exemplary application, specialisation, or hybrid additions. Taking part in research should be an important part, too. The task for the near future has to be to develop a European frame of reference.

XXI. The Sorbonne, Bologna declaration and the Prague Communiqué from 2001 are right to emphasize that the mobility of students has to be encouraged. The European programmes are an essential but not a

sufficient help in this point. It is a demand of the Sorbonne declaration that students' performances at universities should be evaluated according to the internationally established credit point system. Additionally, the possibility to transfer credits internationally and nationally must be guaranteed. Exams should be taken during the time of the normal courses.

It has to be stressed that in Germany the Bachelor and Master Degree can be awarded both by universities and Universities of Applied Sciences. This makes it clear that universities are entitled to offer applied studies and that they can award a degree which reflects the studies' focus on application. On the other hand, Universities of Applied Sciences are as well authorized to provide studies focused on research and to award the corresponding degree. However, at the moment Universities of Applied Sciences might not have the necessary potential for offering such courses of study. This conclusion indicates the further development: In the long run there will be a convergence between the two types of universities. The feature of the future system of higher education in Germany will be intra-institutional diversification.

XXII. The international compatibility of degrees and their mutual acceptance have to be improved. The Agreement of Lisbon in 1997 and the comments on a degree (diploma-supplement) are important steps in the right direction. Additionally, integrated bi- or multinational studies have to become a matter of course.

XXIII. The increasing globalisation of the labour market requires mobile graduates. As a consequence the European, as well as the international dimension

of the curricula have to be extended; in some cases a suitable curricula has to be created right now. Besides the maintenance of the mother tongue, the Sorbonne declaration emphasises the increasing importance of teaching foreign languages. In all courses, teaching in a foreign language should become more important.

XXIV. In the past and in the future the preparation for a professional life takes place in practice, e.g. by training on the job. However, universities have to prepare those for whom science will be the working field. Universities have the task to foster junior academics within universities, but also for research outside the university. The ability for researching should be gained within structured courses of study which lead to a PhD. This course should include a stay abroad and should provide autonomous research (Doctoral thesis).

The German Association of Universities suggests establishing "Centres for Doctoral-Studies" at German universities in order to support those young academics, who want to focus their professional life on science and research. These centres should be established according to the model of graduate colleges. Thus, junior academics are protected against arbitrariness. These centres should be autonomously established by the universities not only as a supplement, but also as a way to establish more competition for the existing way of supporting doctoral candidates (doctoral advisors; special courses for doctoral students).

Centres for Doctoral-Studies should spread the advantages of graduate colleges or -where appropriate - the advantages of graduate schools according to the Anglo-Saxon model to other parts of the university. They should connect the active promotion of junior

scientists and of research. Thus, the focus point of research will be strengthened and should be made publicly known. The centres for doctoral-studies should get favoured funding by the university.

Furthermore, they should offer special compulsory courses for all doctoral-students. These courses should support the students' academic autonomy and should provide a structure from the beginning until the end of the doctoral studies. The doctoral-students will have the possibility to gain additional qualifications.

The aim of the doctoral studies should be to bring the results of the research into a broader context and to avoid junior scientists becoming too specialised in just one aspect of the subject. Furthermore, the doctoral studies should prevent the doctoral students from personal isolation. However, doctoral studies should not lead to an unnecessary prolongation of the time necessary for writing a doctoral thesis, and therefore should always be closely connected to individual research. During the doctoral studies the junior academics should develop an efficient way of working, their capacity for teamwork should be improved, and they should have gained competences, not just in terms of their subject and the relevant methods, but also interdisciplinary competences.

XXV. The validity of knowledge is constantly decreasing. New knowledge originates and existing knowledge is quickly out of date. As a consequence, knowledge gained at the beginning of the studies is overage at the time of the exam. A professional life requires continuing education. Education does not end at the age of 27.

However, universities are traditionally not expected to fulfil the task of continuing education. Yet, in the meantime, many European countries legally assign the task to provide further education to universities.

The Sorbonne declaration stresses the importance of continuing education and underlines that education and training are a life-long obligation. In the future, continuing education will partly replace elementary studies by imparting knowledge just at the time when it is requested in the different professions. That is why universities have to develop an offer of further education that meets the regional needs and the needs of the target groups. It should be possible to get credit points. In connection to this development, the curricula of elementary studies has to get a new structure. There is still a long way to go and a lot to do. However, this restructuring provides the possibility for universities to develop a distinctive profile.

XXVI. The field in which the state and the university are acting, is characterised by increasing international competition and thus by a loss of national sovereignty. The process of transferring more autonomy to universities progresses very slowly and due to the reliance on public funding, universities are increasingly under pressure for justification.

XXVII. Within these coordinates, evaluation and accreditation play an important role. They are the means for quality development and assurance and both judge the quality of the performances of universities.

XXVIII. Institutions, the courses they offer, their research and teaching performance, their management, and their services can be subject to

evaluation. The evaluation aims at improving the quality. This is necessary, as public or other funding requires reporting. Evaluation is part of the competition for academics, students, and for third-party funds. The task of evaluation is to measure the quality of performance in relation to the self-defined aims and purposes. Thus, evaluation is a process of self-reflection. Standards for measuring the quality can be quantitative and/or qualitative; they can be national and/or international.

XXIX. It is self-evident that evaluation is part of the concept of an university. Thus, institutions of higher education always accepted the challenge to answer the question whether, and to what extent, they are able to fulfil their tasks. That is the reason why the universities themselves are responsible for evaluation, which is therefore performed by the universities themselves or, as sometimes in Germany, by a network of universities. Another possibility is that the financier of a university can demand to perform an evaluation. In general, the evaluation starts with a self-assessment, i.e. with a judgement whether and to what extent the institutions have reached their self-defined goals. Self-assessment is the basis for a judgement by external experts (Peer review) who are, as a rule, chosen in consultation with the institutions, which will be evaluated. Thus, it is guaranteed that internationally developed standards are used for evaluating. The results of the examination are given to the institution to make it possible to start measures to improve the performance on the basis of the report. Additionally, the results of the evaluation might lead to take the appropriate steps in case the institution is just a section of a larger institution.

Evaluation might lead to changes in the strategic planning of a university. The results provide information on the strength and weakness of the institution and its programme on the basis of self-defined and externally defined aims. The results of the evaluation can influence the distribution of staff and financial means within a university.

XXX. The accreditation deals with the quality of concepts for the establishment of new courses, degrees, or for the establishment of new institutions. Additionally, it deals with the quality of existing institutions, courses, and degrees. Accreditation aims at the recognition and certification of / at institutions for higher education. It refers to standards which have not been defined by the institution itself or by the applicant, but by the academic community represented by external experts and – often – by the labour market. These standards can target different aspects. First of all, these guidelines can either define minimum or maximum standards. In both cases, the consumer shall be protected and the financier and the public shall be given an account. Additionally, it should be guaranteed that credit points and degrees will be accepted and transferable. Guaranteeing minimum standards is essential for legitimating new courses, degrees, or a new section within an institution. Furthermore, minimum standards are important for assuring that graduates will have access to certain professions.

XXXI. In Germany, until recently, the state was in charge of accreditation. Now it is the task of an accreditation council including representatives of the state, of the university, students and of the professions. Currently, BA and MA courses are scrutinised by the accreditation. The accreditation is performed in a

decentralised system by agencies accredited by the Accreditation Council. In the future, all new courses of study and degrees have to be accredited.

XXXII. The accreditation-procedure starts with an application. The final decision is prepared by judging the applicant's concept for courses or degrees. As a rule, a Peer review is part of the preparation for the final decision, which will be taken according to the criteria defined by the accreditation council. Sometimes the decision is not just a refusal or consent, but consists of hints and preconditions whose fulfilment might finally lead to a positive decision. The accreditation decision is limited in time and published.

XXXIII. Accreditation is a consequence of the increasing autonomy of universities and their integration into a system, which is committed to a certain quality and to meeting the demand of society. Moreover, the necessity of the accreditation is due to the increasing complexity of the system of higher education as a whole, which is featured by more and more transnational courses of study.

XXXIV. According to the declaration of Bologna and claims of the European Association of Universities and other higher education institutions, a European co-operation for the assurance of quality has to take place, in order to develop comparable criteria and methods.

XXXV. Accreditation and evaluation are of great importance for supporting the mobility of students and academic staff. The acknowledgement of credit points and degrees can no longer just be based on mutual agreements between universities as the Sorbonne declaration demands. However, the experience of the

last years shows that states are not willing to give up their sovereignty in this field. For promoting the mobility of students and academic staff in the long run, the creation of a general agreement between the states for the mutual acknowledgement of degrees, courses, and institutions is essential. This is as well important in terms of accreditation. Such a general agreement restricts the autonomy of universities inasmuch as it deals with the recognition of academic performance. Thus, this general agreement should be open for the joining of individual universities.

XXXVI. The increasing autonomy of universities (does not only) requires a system for the assurance of quality, which contributes to the acceptance of the overall responsibility. However, the danger of the increasing autonomy is that it might lead to a separation of universities from each other. As a consequence universities would lose their influence on the general framework which is determined by state and society, and which has a high impact on the work of universities. In order to be able to influence the political process, it is necessary that universities organise themselves in such a way that they are able to speak with one voice. In Germany, the universities articulate their views via the Association of Universities and other higher education institutions, called the German Rectors Conference. Due to the federal system, each region has in addition its own conference.

Notes

¹ The starting point of the Bologna-process was an initiative at the Sorbonne. It has been outlined in the Declaration of Bologna from June 1999 and later in May 2001 in the communiqué of Prague which was signed by 31 European Ministers of Education.

