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Nadja Bieletzki

The Power of Collegiality

A Qualitative Analysis of University Presidents' Leadership in Germany

With a foreword by Prof. Dr. Eva Barlösius

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Foreword

Some studies, though seeming to content themselves with an investigation of one single aspect of a larger structure, in fact go beyond this to indicate wider systematisations and generalisations. The following work belongs to this category: it presents itself as an analysis of leadership among university presidents, or, more specifically, as an empirical study of how, in practice, presidents implement projects of reform within their institutions. In fact, the study achieves much more: Nadja Bieletzki's work shows that the university has a practical self-understanding which is connoted by the term "collegiality". This collegiality preserves and maintains itself through a great diversity of political projects to re-order universities. These projects vary by political fashion, which dictates what measures are deemed necessary to make universities satisfy the objectives that are assigned to them at a given moment. In her study, Nadja Bieletzki shows that these projects set off a reaffirmation and renewal of this collegial self-understanding. This reaffirmation is a response to the changed circumstances of the university. The wider applicability of the work is already apparent in these last two remarks.

As proper to good scientific practice in a theoretically based empirical study, Nadja Bieletzki herself is more careful in her conclusions. She focusses her study on the leadership practices of university presidents, and her analysis is at once comprehensive and incisive. What distinguishes her analysis is that she in fact examines the university as an institution, that is to say, the university as a complete structure. She points to indicators how universities have within a few years — and despite enormous shortfalls in resources and finance — been able to meet political demands which themselves have sometimes been contradictory. A brief survey of the most pressing: the Bologna Process, which required a fundamental restructuring of degree programmes; the double intake of school leavers ("doppelter Abiturjahrgang"), which brought an enormous and rapid growth in the numbers of university entrants; numerous changes in the legislative framework for universities; the introduction of performance-related pay; increased demands for research excellence, above all under the banner of the "Excellence Initiative"; confrontations over the New Public Management; and much more besides. Nadja Bieletzki sets out evidence for the way in which universities have been able to cope with this mass of political projects without surrendering their self-understanding. This evidence also indirectly answers the question of what it is that makes universities so effective and resilient.

After these several prefatory remarks, let us turn to the study itself. Undoubtedly, universities have been transformed by the numerous new expectations and demands placed upon them, some of which were just briefly reviewed above. Individual empirical studies, however, have a role in informing us as to how universities have changed, and how exactly these demands have been met in academic practice. For example: in what way have universities responded to the insistence that they more thoroughly implement principles of New Public Management, and that academic leaders, such as deans and presidents, assume the role of "managers" or "institutional entrepreneurs" — and what central "idea of the university" (Jaspers) is here at play?

The study investigates these questions by looking at the changed position and powers of university presidents, which were altered by the federal state's legislation from the 1990s onwards. The situation in formal, legal terms is clear: the structures of the university have been reshaped in favour of the increased power of presidents, with a weakening of academic self-administration, the most important institutional expression of collegiality. Nadja Bieletzki adopts numerous approaches to investigate empirically what processes of transformation, if any, have been set off by these formal and legal changes. She starts with an examination of whether and how the career path to the position of university president has changed in the last decade. Her analysis covers three points in time: 1980, 1995 and 2011, and thereby spans both the legal changes and the highest ebb of New Public Management.

The conclusion of this part of the research presages the finding which is confirmed by the work as whole: changes have taken place, but they have not fundamentally affected the self-understanding and the practices of universities which give them their unique character and distinguish them from other institutions. So, for example, over the period of 30 years a more or less binding career track has developed which reflects increased professionalisation. It remains, however, a purely academic route which presumes the pursuit of a professorial chair, and which is characterised by the accumulation of general organisational experience within the university. In other words, the career path is aligned with the self-understanding of universities; it represents an academic institution which pays little heed to managerial injunctions to professionalisation.

In the next stage of her investigation Nadja Bieletzki draws on her interviews with university presidents. She shows that they, though having reached their position by a route which has come to have this institutionalised character in academia, they describe their career progression as hazardous and reject any understanding of it as a career path or professional goal. This reticence is consistent with the alignment of the career path to academic self-understanding. This self-understand-

ing includes the principle that striving for truth is legitimate, but striving for institutional power is not. The image of a primus inter pares is preserved despite the formal increase of power.

The chapter "Getting Reforms Done" represents the heart of the work. In it, Nadja Bieletzki analyses how university presidents win approval for projects of reform and how they organise this process. Highly persuasively and in great detail the chapter elaborates that which was promised by the book's title, "The Power of Collegiality". Two of its conclusions are exceptionally instructive. For one, although university senates have been weakened in formal-legal terms, they remain for university presidents the most important body within the university, representing the university as a whole and being the linchpin of academic self-governance. All the university presidents interviewed saw gaining the senate's support for their reform projects as imperative. None of the presidents had pushed through a proposal in the teeth of opposition from the senate, and nor would they have done so, even though in almost every case they held the formal power so to do. Further, presidents set up informal working groups which guided processes of reform through the various university committees and which drew up compromises and secured acceptance for them. In this manner, these working groups ensured that the presidents' projects became projects of the universities as a whole. The presidents made scant use of their increased legal, formal power in their leadership practice. They acted, furthermore, in keeping with the self-understanding of the university, that it is to say, according to the norms of collegiality.

What should we make of all this? Should it be seen as the failure of the political intentions embodied in the legal changes, or as the obdurate resistance of universities, faces set against demands for innovation — or something else entirely? Only those who are ignorant of academic life would scorn the principle of first among equals as something backward and anachronistic, and persist in calling for a "managerial entrepreneur" at the helm of the university. A considerable part of the effectiveness and resilience of the university can likely be attributed to adherence to its own academic self-understanding, of which collegiality is a quintessential part. That universities have in the space of a few years and with a lack of resources mastered the various and often contradictory demands put upon them testifies to the especial aptness of this form of leadership to universities. For this reason, further politically initiated disciplinary measures which purport to make university leadership more efficient and effective can hardly be justified, at least in so far as such measures take large business as a model. Nadja Bieletzki has arrestingly shown the power that collegiality wields in the university. What strength the university draws from this collegiality would be one question that further research might address.

Prof. Dr. Eva Barlösius

Contents

1 Introduction 1

2 State of the Art 5

2.1 Universities as Organizations, Shared Governance, and Collegiality . 5

2.1.1 What Kind of Organizations are Universities? 5

2.1.2 Shared Governance in Universities 11

2.1.3 The Concept of Collegiality at Universities 22

2.1.4 German Universities: Changes in Formal Regulations, the Organization, Shared Governance, and Collegiality 26

2.2 Research on University Presidents 32

2.3 Career Paths of University Presidents 39

3 Theories Applied in this Study 43

3.1 Analyzing Career Paths of University Presidents with Bourdieu 44

3.1.1 The Scientific Field 44

3.1.2 Scientific Capital 46

3.1.3 Habitus 49

3.2 Understanding Reforms in Universities with Micro/Organizational Politics 50

3.2.1 The Concept of Micro Politics in this Study 52

3.2.2 The Sources and Three Dimensions of Power 56

4 Methods and Sampling 63

4.1 Qualitative Approach: Semi-Structured Expert Interviews 73

4.2 Qualitative Content Analysis 74

4.3 Coding 75

5 Career Paths of German University Presidents: 2011, 1995 and 1980 77

5.1 The Sample ... 79
5.2 Results - Career Paths: 2011 ... 80
5.2.1 Internal and External Recruitment, and Gender in 2011 ... 80
5.2.2 Academic Disciplines ... 81
5.2.3 Experience in Academic Self-Administration: Deanship and Vice-Presidency ... 82
5.2.4 University President ... 85
5.3 Results - Career Paths: 1995 ... 85
5.3.1 Internal and External Recruitment, and Gender in 1995 ... 85
5.3.2 Academic Disciplines ... 86
5.3.3 University President ... 88
5.4 Results - Career Paths: 1980 ... 88
5.4.1 Internal and External Recruitment, and Gender ... 88
5.4.2 Academic Disciplines ... 90
5.4.3 Deanship and Vice-Presidency ... 90
5.4.4 University President ... 90
5.4.5 Conclusions Regarding Presidential Career Paths ... 91
5.5 Brief Digression: Job Advertisements ... 95
6 Self-Description Given by German University Presidents ... 99
6.1 Transition into presidency ... 99
6.2 Necessary Skills and Prior Experience ... 103
6.3 Transition from Expert Scientist to Top-Level Administrator ... 105
6.4 Shape and Create ... 108
6.5 Summary ... 110
7 Getting Reforms Done ... 115
7.1 Initiating a Reform ... 117
7.1.1 Constructing a Need for Reform ... 117
7.1.2 First Contact Persons ... 118

7.1.3 Telling the Academic Senate and the University 121
7.2 Conducting the Reform 122
7.2.1 Support and Resistance 122
7.2.2 Coping with Anticipated Resistance 123
7.2.3 How to Deal with Different Forms of Resistance 124
7.2.4 Dealing with Resistance and Fostering Support 127
7.3 Essential Reform Requirements 129
7.3.1 Networks and Coalitions 129
7.3.2 Working Groups 131
7.4 Formal Power vs. Collegiality 140
7.4.1 Why not Use Formal Power Instead? 140
7.4.2 Norms of Collegiality 142
7.5 Summary 144
7.5.1 Initiating Reforms 144
7.5.2 Dealing with Resistance 145
7.5.3 Essential Reform Requirements 146
7.5.4 Formal Power vs. Collegiality 149
8 How University Presidents Cope with the Academic Senate, the Ministry, and the Board of Trustees 153
8.1 Federal State Ministries of Science 153
8.2 The Board of Trustees 155
8.3 The Federal State Board of Trustees 157
8.4 The Academic Senates 158
8.5 The Academic Senate, the Board of Trustees, the Federal State Ministry of Science in Relation to one Another According to the University Presidents 162
8.6 Summary 166
9 Results and Discussion 171
9.1 The Presidential Career Paths 171

9.2 Collegiality 175
9.3 Formality – Informality and how University Presidents Deal with Both 176
9.4 Decision-Making in Universities is a Process, not an Event. 185

List of Figures

Figure 1. Normative presidential career path acc. to Cohen/March 40

Figure 2. Career path of German university presidents 92

List of Tables

Table 1: A framework for analyzing the role of shared governance in strategic change processes 13

Table 2: Criteria for sampling university presidents 67

Table 3: Sample distribution: mode of recruitment and time in office 68

Table 4: Distribution of internally and externally recruited university presidents in the 2011 sample 81

Table 5: University Presidents in 2011: academic disciplines of Professors among the University Presidents..... 82

Table 6: University Presidents in 2011: Deanship 84

Table 7: University Presidents in 2011: Vice-Presidency..... 84

Table 8: University Presidents in 1995: Internal and External Recruitment 86

Table 9: University Presidents in 1995: Academic Disciplines 87

Table 10: University Presidents in 1980: Internal and External Recruitment 89

Table 11: University Presidents in 1980: Academic Disciplines 89