

Imagining the National Institution: German and British undergraduates on the values associated with higher education.

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Abstract

Neo-institutionalists suggest that actors are embedded within organisational fields characterised by a distinctive configuration of rules, roles and practices. There is already a considerable volume of research on higher education that draws on this perspective, and this paper seeks to extend this literature by offering the notion of the *national* university institution. That is, that it is possible – and perhaps useful – to theorise and understand domestic policy responses to global trends in relation to a nationally-specific conceptualisation of how universities do, or should, operate. Drawing on interviews with undergraduates in Germany and England, countries with somewhat contrasting university sectors, similarities and differences emerged around the values they associated with higher education. It will be suggested that this may afford us the opportunity of imagining how the national higher education (neo-) institutions may compare and be understood by their constituents.

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Paper

Theory and Context

'The University, in Europe and elsewhere, is currently involved in changes that have a potential for transforming its institutional identity and constitutive logic. At stake are the University's purpose, work processes, organisation, system of governance and financial basis, as well as its role in the political system, the economy, and society at large.'(Olsen 2007, 25)

The work is positioned in relation to two overlapping bodies of literature. The first relates to the extensive volume of work around global changes in the size, governance and funding of higher education over the past two decades or so (e.g. Marginson 2004; Robertson 2009). Universities worldwide, it seems, are increasingly realigning – or being forced to realign – themselves according to the neoliberal principles of non-state funding for teaching and research, personal and national economic utility, and domestic and international competition as mechanisms for constant improvement. The second body belongs to that of neo-institutional theory as described by authors such as Meyer and Rowan (1977) and March and Olsen (2006). March and Olsen (2006) describe institutions as relatively stable collections of rules, practices and roles that actors in a given sector align with, enact, and reproduce over time. This formulation appears well-suited to an analysis of higher education, and there is no shortage of scholars applying this theoretical approach to the sector and its ongoing developments (Krücken and Rübken 2009).

Olsen (2007) considers that the institution's 'identity and constitutive logic' are currently undergoing substantial changes. This analysis is largely supported elsewhere, and observers are largely critical of these changes as being in tension of the principles on which higher education is, or has traditionally been, based (e.g. Codd 2005; Nixon 2011). However, while there is extensive academic commentary on academics' perspectives of trends in the sector, there is little analysis of what students themselves might consider universities' 'constitutive logic' to be, be they neoliberal or other. It is also important to acknowledge that these global trends do unroll unevenly in different university contexts; it is posited here that the institution differs between countries, and that this might offer a useful extension to the (neo-institutional) higher education literature. Germany and England were considered to offer a potentially fruitful comparison due to their unequal engagement with neoliberal higher education policies (Pritchard 2011). German universities have been insulated from many of the extensive governance and funding changes seen in England due to its relatively inflexible systemic rigidity. They have retained an almost total reliance on state support for research and teaching while in England this is not the case (Auranen and Nieminen 2010).

Methodology;

Six German and seven English undergraduates from 'Feuerbach' Universität and 'Mill' University were recruited and interviewed. Feuerbach and Mill are comprehensive but STEM-inclined, research-intensive universities with 15-20,000 students, established in regional towns in the 1960s-70s. They differ, though, in two key areas: Mill employs a highly selective admissions system

and is well-ranked, while Feuerbach is not a high status university and its entrance requirements would not be considered stringent. It could be argued, though, that this is typical of universities of their type in their respective countries.

The participants were invited to discuss their understanding of the university system and broader context. In order to explore the notion of the sector's ethos, comparisons between different institutions were sought. For example, questions around the difference between school and university learning elicited notions of more independent study and learning at university, while an underlying goal of human progress rather than profit emerged when juxtaposing research in universities with that of the pharmaceutical industry.

Results and Discussion

There was considerable convergence in the values both groups attributed to the sector. There were, though, a number of contrasts which appear to connect with their respective national settings.

Table 1.1: Values underpinning higher education

Values Common to both Groups	Values only Expressed at Mill	Values only Expressed at Feuerbach
Systematic thought	Degrees as prestigious	Freedom in teaching
Personal independence	Universities as profit-oriented	
Freedom in research	Degree as a Period of Personal Development	
Public knowledge		
Broad range of subjects		
Social progress		
Equality		
Meritocracy		
Tolerance		

The common areas to some extent reflect the principles attributed to Wilhelm von Humboldt (1809; 1986). Olsen (2007) describes this as the 'Knowledge Republic' model of higher education, based on a rational, reasoned pursuit of truth, oriented towards to benefit society rather than profit or other forms of utilitarianism. Meritocracy and equality post-date von Humboldt's vision but his name has nonetheless been invoked as a defence against the imposition of tuition fees in Germany, for example (Ash 2006).

It appears that the English students saw universities as simultaneously aligned with Humboldtian *and* neoliberal principles without being aware of a potential cognitive dissonance. Firstly, as Codd (2005) outlines, a commercially-orientated research agenda may be in tension with publicly available, unbiased knowledge. Secondly, they all believed that universities should be socially egalitarian in their intake, but at the same time several considered exclusivity in access necessary to provide graduates with privileged status on the labour market.

For the German students, another Humboldtian principle - freedom of teaching, or *Lehrfreiheit* - appeared in an unexpected way. Intended to free academics to teach the material they felt was important, it also appears to insulate a handful of poor (uninteresting or incomprehensible) lecturers from

taking remedial action to improve their teaching. In other words, they were free to teach as they wanted, as well as what they wanted.

Implications

While the sample size here is too small to assume any external validity, the values associated with higher education in the groups do reflect the reality of their national policy contexts. If the somewhat distinct value sets represent each country's national institution, then Germany's may still be understood as knowledge republic while England's could perhaps be seen as a hybrid neoliberal knowledge republic. This work appears to merit further extension, both over a larger sample size and also towards a more detailed analysis of how their respective rules, roles and practices might mesh together or potentially conflict.

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