

Internationality with German characteristics On the relationship of stratification and internationality in German higher education (0220)

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For a long time the German higher education system was only marginally stratified. Degrees from higher education institutions of the same type were seen as equal in value with differences between disciplines rather than universities (cf. Kreckel 2010). Recently, stratificatory differences between universities have been increasing. They go hand in hand with a development that induces stronger organizational hierarchies with regard to the distribution of funding and decision-making (Meier & Krücken 2006). Universities as organizations have received more leeway to position themselves as competitors vis-à-vis other universities. One of the most visible marker of such aspirations is internationality (Bloch et al. 2014). Internationality refers to a large body of recommendations, practice, and theory that encompasses aspects of globalization just as well as concepts such as intercultural competences, cross-border cooperation, and student mobility. It alludes to the core function of science and refers to an inherently global scientific community. It however also has become a topos of higher education that is used to transform the university in a distinct way. While almost all German universities have by now implemented internationalization strategies, internationality is at the same time construed as a sign of excellence. League tables and competitive funding mechanisms such as the Excellence Initiative use internationality as a criterion to define rank and distribute funding. In this sense internationality refers to the organizational positioning of universities in a national and global competition.

The presentation contributes to the discussion of stratification in higher education by addressing the ways in which vertical differentiation is produced along the concept of internationality in Germany and how this affects higher education. Discourses and practices of internationality are insofar specific as the universal and global interconnectedness they address is overwhelmingly situated within a perception of universities as part of the nation state. It is the peculiar structural genesis of the research university (cf. Riddle 1996) that allows to grasp internationality as a specific concept along which governments and universities can induce vertical differentiation within a field and which distributes legitimacy towards higher education institutions.

The presentation will first map out various relevant strategies and devices that induce internationality among degree programs and graduate schools in Germany. A large part of these strategies and devices either demand of the respective programs to competitively translate internationality in comparable criteria or directly – e.g. rankings – commensurate internationality into quantifiable metrics (cf. Espeland & Stevens 1998). In responding, universities as organizations inscribe such imperatives into their formal structure. They thus follow a logic of real abstraction (Marx 1983) that transforms science-immanent processes into science-external aspects of organizations. Within this logic universities can be international in a similar way as non-scientific organizations such as multinational companies, supranational governing bodies or football clubs. Decoupled from its respective meaning in research and teaching processes, “internationality” as an abstraction functions

as a signaling resource towards governments, students, employers, journalists, and other stakeholders.

Researchers and students take on a double role as members of both the scientific community and the organization “university”. They maintain their work activities while at the same time adhere to the organizational demands of developing internationality as a resource. As a second step the paper investigates how these abstractions impact on the day-to-day activities. We draw on case studies at two graduate schools funded within the framework of the German Excellence Initiative and three aspiring private universities between 2013 and 2015. The case studies comprise of 95 semi-structured expert-interviews with professors, students and administration as well as participant observation of various organizational arrangements. The aim of these studies was to reconstruct stratificatory criteria that play a role in degree programs and graduate schools and how they influence and change the way teaching/doctoral education plays out. We use examples that show how internationality interacts with other norms during selection processes at a graduate school and how international students participate in group work with German students in highly competitive professional course.

In contrast to Meyer and Rowan (1977) assumptions of a de-coupling of abstract criteria from day-to-day activities, the examples show that internationality does not remain on the level of the formal structure. Rather, it requires certain activities and influences how these activities take place. Graduate schools cannot claim internationality without having international students. Universities cannot install programs specifically for international students on a broad scale but have to integrate them into their regular courses. Such processes not only translate (literally) the form in which content is transported (in English) but also the way students interact. Degree programs that are run by Germans in Germany adjust the specific scientific culture to the demands of international students. The hard-working, calculating, self-confident domestic student has to cooperate with international students that have been living with “calamities” in their respective home countries. It transforms the way in which the student approaches other cultures but it also changes the work ethics of international students. Both groups undergo a formation process that cognitively changes their competences and adjusts to a specific organizational “style” (Binder & Wood 2014). In responding to the demand for internationality German universities not only position themselves as organizations towards other universities but also inherently transform the way they engage in their daily activities. The programs they offer become international with German characteristics.

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