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University Leaders in Germany: Towards Greater Professionalism and the Professionalisation of Others?

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Abstract:

While university chancellors (*Kanzler*) are not required to be professors, this is the case for presidents, rectors and vice-presidents who are the most senior managers of their institutions. In Germany it is assumed that the professorial title qualifies sufficiently for taking on such senior management roles. However, the tasks of university leaders have become highly complex and require a wide breadth of knowledge and skills, for example in legal matters, human resource management, controlling and quality management. These may not, arguably, be actually acquired along the traditional pathway to becoming a professor. This paper presents data gained from website research into senior management staff and their disciplinary backgrounds, in addition to qualitative interviews conducted with leaders who were asked about their support of informal leaders, so-called science managers. It explores how senior managers themselves are engaging with growing professionalism, and helping staff, in turn, to develop their own professional skills.

Paper:

Higher education institutions are among the most complex forms of specific organisation (Pucciarelli et al., 2016; Altbach, 2014; Musselin, 2006). Through the establishment of disciplinary standards and exchange with various professional or learned networks beyond the institution, HEIs provide qualifications for young people who will go on to take up positions of responsibility in all walks of life. This is one major form of output with both tangible and intangible aspects. Teaching and research, the two main components involved in this general role, are today supported by a host of administrative staff engaged in a wide range of activities, including, for example, student administration, the management of campus sites and buildings, legal and finance departments, international and development offices. Many of them are involved in providing informal leadership support, an area of employment defined in Germany as science management (Krempkow et al. 2019; Krücken et al. 2010). It is important that such staff are able to fulfil their tasks in an efficient and flexible manner, as the status quo of any HEI is in a constant state of change. Numerous additional factors external to the institution need to be kept in consideration. State coffers provide differing levels of support, funding initiatives need addressing, developments in cutting edge research impact on research foci and the strategic focus of institutions, to name some of the main areas of attention. It is important therefore that those at the top of an HEI are able to provide effective leadership. However, principles of effective leadership are still not being given particular emphasis within the

sector (Ruben et al. 2017: 3). Unlike leadership positions in other areas of employment, which require official training or particular qualifications, the election by peers to the position of rector, for example, is still more likely guided by research output and reputation within a scientific field than by competences in areas such as personnel or controlling. However, as Ruben et al. (2017: 87) put it: “The role of (HE) leader also requires one to understand a much broader landscape and to appreciate the perspectives of multiple stakeholders within and outside the institution”.

Positions of key responsibility, e.g. rectors, presidents, deans, remain filled by professors whose status *per se* is thought to be sufficient qualification for the task. This belief is surprising given the complexity of senior management roles and the amount of knowledge that is actually required in order to provide effective institutional leadership. Many leaders are aware of their own knowledge gaps and attend specialised courses, or alternatively ensure that their support staff are highly qualified and receive additional training. If knowledge gaps remain, this may be to the detriment of strategic capacity of the whole institution (Thoenig & Paradeise 2016).

So: who are senior management leaders in German HEIs? What disciplines do they come from, and to what extent do disciplinary backgrounds prepare better/less well for senior management roles? To go some way towards answering these questions, I present findings from a dataset which was generated in 2019 by trawling university websites at the start of KaWuM – a BMBF-funded research collaboration. KaWuM examines the career paths and qualification requirements in science and higher education management (see kawum-online.de). Biographies from over 700 leaders were analysed and information gathered on senior managers and their disciplinary backgrounds.

In German universities there is still an acknowledged lack of professional development programmes in place, a situation that is only beginning to change slowly. In order to understand the extent to which senior managers lay value on the professionalisation of staff, in particular those in informal leadership positions (e.g. science managers who work in strategic support roles), nine qualitative interviews were conducted in a first exploratory round with a range of senior management leaders (Harris-Huermann et al. 2021, in press). This was followed by 30 interviews conducted in a second qualitative phase, which has also included interviews with trainers, network members, more junior academics, and science managers. The second research question posed here asks to what extent HEI senior leaders are aware of and support the professional development of their science managers and how they promote systems of professional development to ensure science managers are able to maximise their roles and provide better overall support.

Findings will be summarised and suggestions for further professional practice in senior management leadership provided.

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