

186 Leadership style and intra-university knowledge transfer in German higher education: making complementary use of administrative and disciplinary expertise in organizational development

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Abstract

Intra-university knowledge transfer in state higher education institutions (HEIs) is under-researched (Beutel 2015). Expertise within an HEI is not necessarily identified as a useful resource for organisational development, e.g. bringing subject-specific knowledge from within the scientific disciplines into administrative processes, and, in the other direction, transferring administrative knowledge back into research. The German BMBF-funded project AGICA - Agile Campus - University Internal Knowledge Transfer between Science and Administration (2022-2025) addresses this research gap and investigates aspects of and opportunities for knowledge transfer between university administrators. In our research we combine theories of leadership styles (Chen et al. 2016), which focus on the mindset and habitus of professors, with social exchange theory (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005), which concentrates on workplace behaviour (here: administration). We propose that the realisation of mutual 'benefit' of knowledge transfer within HEIs can enhance and support leadership and organisational development, in particular in association with a transformational leadership style.

Full paper

Universities are considered the most important producers of knowledge (Boaz et al. 2008). Equally, they are described as supercomplex, multiple hybrid organisations (Barnett, 2000; Kleimann, 2019). In terms of their third mission, they transfer this knowledge to society and, via project funding and contract research, increasingly into the political arena (Berghäuser 2020; Hölscher 2015). Inhibiting and facilitating factors for knowledge transfer from universities to the outside world have already been discussed (Hachmeister et al. 2015; Henke et al. 2017). Administrators have not been considered as recipients of knowledge transfer and have generally been overlooked in studies of HE governance (Banscherus, 2018). Along with the increased expectations of teaching and research staff, the demands on the performance of university administrations, transparency, flexibility, and a holistic approach have increased (Mergel et al., 2021). Buzzwords such as innovation, digitization, agile working, and other approaches to a future-oriented institution are now in strong focus (Bartonitz et al., 2018; Nickson, 2019).

Knowledge transfer within state higher education institutions (HEIs) remains under-researched (Beutel 2015). The German BMBF-funded project AGICA - Agile Campus - University Internal Knowledge Transfer between Science and Administration (2022-2025) addresses this research gap and investigates aspects of and opportunities for knowledge transfer between university administrators and researchers.

At many universities, knowledge about the effective, modern and future-oriented design of administrative processes and organization, communication strategies and management measures, such as those used in agile administrations, is being generated as part of the research activities of professors and specific research projects, in particular those in the Management, Business and Social Sciences with a focus on leadership and governance. The AGICA project addresses the fundamental research question as to how university administrations can benefit from the research, methodological know-how and knowledge that is being generated within any individual higher education institution (HEI). To what extent is knowledge transfer between science and university administration already taking place? Which structures are conducive to this, and which are obstructive? In this paper, we specifically want to explore the extent to which different leadership styles of the respective university leaders (chancellors, presidents and rectors) influence this intra-university knowledge transfer.

HEIs are particular environments that internally display a range of different working and organisational contexts. Professors and researchers enjoy fairly high degrees of autonomy, whereas administrators are predominantly located in hierarchical and more controlled working environments. It is therefore possible to identify (at least) two different main mindsets within one and the same institution. In our research we combine theories of leadership, which focus in particular on the mindset and scope of professors, with social exchange theory (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005), which concentrates on workplace behaviour (here: administration). Social exchange theory argues that human interaction is a form of marketplace, where there are mutually rewarding „transactions“ or „exchanges“ (Emerson, 1976: 336). We propose that the realisation of mutual ‚benefit‘ of knowledge transfer within HEIs can enhance and support leadership and organisational development. In particular we reflect on different leadership styles (Chen et al. 2016) and the influence and interplay of different leadership styles on the organization (Khan et al., 2020; Raja et al., 2018).

In the first phase of our empirical work (2022-2023), AGICA has completed more than 20 semi-structured interviews with different groups of stakeholders, including HE administrators, administrative staff, scientific employees and professors at four universities in one German federal state (16 in total). The state in question is representative, as it is one of the largest German states, and has a wide range of different types of HEI. The online interviews (60 minutes each) were completed in June 2023, recorded, transcribed, coded in MAXQDA, and analyzed.

We are already able to provide tentative thematic first statements about the relationship between the (transformational) leadership style behavior of university leaders in the context of externally funded projects (such as innovation labs) and intra-university knowledge transfer. This first qualitative stage is now being followed by a large N-study (2023-2024), which will take up emerging trends from the first empirical phase. This will finally be followed by a second round of qualitative interviews (2024-2025).

The interviews are already suggesting that the leadership style of university leaders does appear to have a significant impact on intra-university knowledge transfer. For example, a transformational leadership style creates an "atmosphere of trust" (research associate) within which knowledge is willingly shared across hierarchies. A more authoritarian leadership style, however, may lead to hierarchies and responsibilities being at the forefront of organizational communication, which can restrict knowledge transfer and organizational development.

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