

## **Presidents in German research-intensive universities between 2018-2023: tracking disciplines and paths to top leadership**

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### **Research Domains**

Management, leadership, governance and quality (MLGQ)

### **Abstract**

The tasks higher education (HE) leaders face today are highly complex and require a breadth of knowledge and skills, for example in legal matters, human resource management, budgeting and quality management. Leaders need to be aware of and be able to react to volatile and changing political and legal situations, both locally and globally, as the entire institutional field of HE has become inextricably inter-connected to become a global phenomenon. Presidents/rectors of Germany's 32 comprehensive, research-intensive universities, e.g. those that offer degrees in all disciplines, are mostly recruited into top leadership positions from within their faculties or, less frequently, from other institutions. Who are they, and what is their background? Is this important for the fulfilment of their leadership role? To answer these questions, this paper presents quantitative data on German presidents/rectors gathered from web-based research into academic leaders and their disciplinary backgrounds between 2018-2023.

### **Full paper**

#### **Introduction**

Higher education institutions are among the most complex forms of specific organisation (Altbach, 2014; Austin & Jones, 2016; Musselin, 2006; Pucciarelli et al., 2016). 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, many of which require official training or very specific qualifications, the election by peers to the position of president/rector, for example, remains more likely guided by research output and reputation within a scientific field than by competences in areas such as estate management, human resources 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 are filled by professors whose

hierarchical level *per se* is believed to be sufficient qualification for the task. This is perhaps surprising given the complexity of senior management roles and the amount of knowledge that is actually required in order to provide effective institutional leadership. Other factors external to the institution also need 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. While some HE leaders may be aware of their own knowledge gaps and attend specialised courses, they may not have time to receive dedicated training. Alternatively, they may wish their support staff to be 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).

The governance of HE in Germany is located within the so-called 'Continental European Model' (Clark, 1983). Austin and Jones (2016: 13) summarise this as follows: "[...] system-based, strongly hierarchical coordination through state-centred policies; no institutional autonomy; powerful authority of the academic guilds; and faculties and schools constituting confederations of chair-holders". During recent decades and as a result of global neo-liberalism, German state-financed HE has become highly influenced by market forces, where academic output (e.g. course completion rates and/or employment post-graduation) is seen as a main currency of success. HE leaders therefore face the ongoing conundrum of peers who hark back to the traditions and HE culture of previous centuries against "modern neoliberal philosophy that touts the market as an efficient means of allocating scarce resources." (ibid. 18) It is against this backdrop that HE leaders need an awareness of such tensions, not only in relation to their own institution, but also with regard to its place within the wider landscape of HE.

Germany consists of 16 federal states, some of which are small, consisting of city states such as Berlin or Hamburg. Others such as Bavaria, North Rhine Westfalia or Lower Saxony are large enough to be independent countries in their own right. 32 research-intensive, so-called comprehensive universities, provide degree programmes in all main disciplines including medicine and these occupy highly-visible and influential positions in the German HE sector overall. A call to become president/rector in one of these HEIs, therefore, is usually built upon considerable history, reputation and traditions.

## Methodology

This paper draws on a section of data from a wider body of online research on German HE leaders sourced via a website-based trawl of HEI websites. From a current total of 421 HEIs (destatis, 31.03.2025), this paper concentrates on the presidents/rectors (both terms are used in Germany) of 32 state-financed, comprehensive universities as a particularly important, research-intensive sub-set of Germany's HEIs, which also include other privately-funded or specific HEIs such as Universities of Applied Science, or Technological Universities. Research also included examining CVs where accessible. Further criteria

included year of foundation, student numbers, public/private-funding, religion-based, gender, date of post.

## **Results and Analysis**

Most presidents/rectors rise to the top of a comprehensive university if they originally come from a natural sciences background such as physics, chemistry, biology or medicine (59 %). The social sciences or humanities are less well represented (22 % and 16 % respectively). Many presidents will have held positions of responsibility before such as Heads of Department/Institute, Deans, Vice-Presidents, or Directors of a specialised research group (Sonderforschungsbereich-SFB). Only one quarter are women and of this group (8) six come from the natural sciences. Aspiring women presidents should therefore be made aware of this disciplinary bias and the need for occupying positions of responsibility.