COMMUNICATION & LANGUAGE at work

Designing the Organizational Future: How German Universities communicate Governance Changes by means of Corporate Design.

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Abstract

Purpose: Over the last decades, universities in general have seen an increase in managerial top-down policies, often pertaining to strategic organizational communication. This paper, in addressing such managerial policies, does focus on German universities as they provide an interesting context to explore the rise of strategic organizational communication as a managerial practice. German universities grant full legal autonomy to their chairholders, and thus, faculty compliance with top management policies cannot be exacted. From there, it seems worthwhile exploring how university management tries to initiate compliance by communicative means. One prominent communication strategy pertains to Corporate Design (CD): university administrations disseminate guidelines as to the use of all forms of planned, visual communication. With this managerial practice in view, we explore arguments employed in exemplary CD guidelines. The overall aim is to show how management attempts to initiate faculty compliance via rational and persuasive communication.

Frame: This case study combines Bourdieusian field theory with neo-institutionalist and narratological approaches. In order to explore how university leadership tries to assert governance claims, we refer, in particular, to the concepts of field struggles, isomorphic change, and legitimacy.

Approach: Our case study concentrates on the attempted implementation of CD in German universities. Our sample comprises 40 CD manuals, most of them with official prefaces by university presidents. In order to detect dominant themes in these manuals we employ thematic analysis.

Findings: We find that CD policies are being used, by management, as a strategic marketing instrument for external communication, as well as a soft, internal governance instrument. We identify two dominant themes: First, university leadership argues in favor of CD by referring to external and internal stakeholders (legitimation). With a view to external stakeholders, management argues that CD is an important communication instrument of differentiation in a perceived university 'market'. As to internal stakeholders, CD is intended to integrate both individual scholars, as well as scholarly sub-units into an overarching organizational structure. In this case, we consider CD to be a specific symbolic mode of communication aiming to have impact on the university's perception externally and internally. Second, we find different persuasive management strategies supposed to actually make faculty employ the new CD

(governance). Here, we identify highly different communication strategies, ranging from direct orders to appeals. The variety in strategic communication reveals the organizational paradox of restricted legal governance options, and the new managerial claim to governance.

Implications: We contribute to higher education and organizational communication research by revealing homogeneic rationales for an isomorphic change process that are being described as differentiation. We alert that legal professorial autonomy may slowly be eroded by means of consistent strategic communication.

Keywords

University Governance, Corporate Design, Higher Education, Visual Communication, Soft Governance, Academic Field

"In the new economic university, objects are being subjectified, whilst subjects are being objectified" (Höhne, 2019)

1   Changing power relations in German academia: towards the entrepreneurial university

In the last decades, numerous European university systems have been undergoing fundamental changes. We observe a distinct shift towards organizational economization and a transformation of universities into 'entrepreneurial universities', mimicking private for-profit organizations. In this study, we focus on Germany, where this large-scale change has shown effect as well. However, in the German setting, this economization is taking place at considerably slower pace when compared to other (especially neighboring) countries. The process of economization, we argue, is being manifested by its organizational governance form of New Public Management (from here: NPM). NPM has been steadily increasing in the German university sector since the 1990s. Its rise was further strengthened in 2005, when the German Federal Government intervened in university strategies by strongly nudging within-field-competition for funding via the so called 'Excellence Initiative' (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung (BMBF), 2018; Neumann, 2015; Strohschneider, 2009). As of now (2019), German universities are strongly pushed towards transforming into 'entrepreneurial universities' (Dörre & Neis, 2010; Maasen & Weingart, 2006; Scherm, 2013; Weingart, 2010). This competitive funding program of the 'Excellence Initiative' has incited universities to re-organize, sometimes fundamentally, organizational structures: now being competitors in an increasingly stratified German university field, they currently, it seems, strive for transforming into business-like, competitive corporations (Krücken, Blümel, & Kloke, 2009; Krücken & Meier, 2006; Meier, 2009, 2010). Since the launch of the 'Excellence Initiative' the statutory frame of the German higher education (from here: HE) system has been changing: the German state is withdrawing, increasingly, from a 'nanny state' regulation and handing over, piece by piece, responsibility to individual university management. In consequence, individual university leaders, and leadership bodies, have secured increased autonomy in decision-making. This significant increase in power is thought to enable universities to implement, top down, new governance instruments.

However, these power shifts do not go conflict-free. Rather, they are embedded in a field of struggles (Bourdieu, 1988) over supremacy and influence (Hüther & Krücken, 2013). So far, universities have hardly been more than an infrastructural network hinged upon disciplines, faculties, and professorial chairs. The German university system was (and, to a certain extent, still is) mainly based on academic autonomy with a high degree of self-government by professors, while university presidents, or deans, are wont to exert more or less representational function. In view of this, the amplification of centralized management power does pose a threat to the status of the individual scholar as 'primus inter pares', this representing the traditional construction of scholarly preoccupation and conduct (Hüther, 2010). Therefore, the increase on central governance can be regarded as a cutback on both, the dominant position of disciplines within the academic system, and on professorial chair autonomy. Faculty claims to autonomy often conflict with management claims to governance, and this conflict is apt to impede the introduction of NPM instruments and logics (Lueg, 2018). Thus, university management cannot, in a sense of control and sanctions, implement new governance structures solely by direct coercion. We would argue, that rather, university management is increasingly dependent on the 'loyalty' of university members (Graf, 2019). In order to strengthen loyal relations with tenured faculty and to foster the emergence of a 'corporate identity' in the sense of Melewar & Jenkins, 2002 (see also Melewar & Akel, 2005), management resorts to various, slightly more subtle, steering instruments in order to slowly legitimize the governance shift. How do university management try to enforce this novel claim of governance over faculty? A particularly clear-cut example, we propose, of a subtle governance instrument, at German universities, are Corporate Design (henceforth: CD) policies. In the last decades, strategic organizational communication has gained importance in many universities. Almost all German universities have made great efforts, in the last ten to 15 years, developing a

comprehensive CD system. Logos, slogans, icons, own fonts and colors were newly developed or revised. Even though CD elements are not a new issue to German universities, CD policies reached a new level regarding the scope and detail of the design specifications on the one hand and the obligatory character of such specifications on the other hand. While, hitherto, the use of the universities' CD (if existent) had hardly any relevance in faculty everyday-life, we propose to view the blossoming communicative focus on CD policies as a striking example of a governance instrument legitimizing and initiating structural change. The governmental strategy behind CD implementation might thus serve to understand the changing structure and the changing leadership-faculty-relation in the German field of HE.

Hence, with a view to CD manuals, we investigate the research question:

How does university management communicate the introduction of a new corporate design policy?

2 Research design: Corporate Design policies as governance instrument in German universities

In order to investigate university governance claims and enforcement of leadership – and communicative legitimation and persuasion strategies, in particular –, we take a closer look at university CD manuals. These are usually provided to faculty via the university's Intranet and they present detailed information on both design elements (logo, fonts), and various communication media (letterheads, presentations, door signs, websites). A particularity of these CD manuals, in most cases, is a preface by the university president. Such prefaces are formal features of policy papers published and circulated at German universities: the university president, here, frames information as to rationales and implications of the policy paper in question. This ceremonial genre, we argue, is being chosen in synchronization with the legal and statutory faculty structure: university presidents seem to assume that the CD guidelines need authoritative, ceremonial framing in order to be heard by faculty. In many cases, an appealing, legitimizing approach is being chosen, with tone of voice and language often signaling the existence of a dialogic communication between management and faculty (Lundholt & Uldal, 2019). Notably, several prefaces refer to having involved and "heard" selected faculty voices over the course of CD development. However, and overall, the presidential prefaces show every sign of a simple one-way communication, adhering to the transmission model of communication, and thus remaining within the "information paradigm" of leadership communication. This, rather basic, paradigm grants all power of meaning and message creation to the ones that are in charge of communicating decisions. The recipient is talked about, sometimes, as having had a say in the matter – however, the chosen way of communication is lean, direct, and asymmetrical (Daft & Lengel, 1986; Lundholdt & Uldal, 2019, p. 28). We conjecture that it is the written document itself that is meant to transmit a "final message" (Lundholt & Uldal, 2019, p. 26), and to seek legitimacy and acceptance; it can thus be considered a governance instrument.

2.1 Sampling

Out of the 107 full universities (clearly distinct from universities of applied science, colleges etc.) in Germany, we probed, for our case study, 40 universities. These 40 universities, if a convenience sample, proved to show, on later inspection, satisfactory contrasts with a view to range of subjects, organizational size as well as reputation. Two universities did not (yet) have their own CD guidelines. CD manuals of three other universities were lacking a preface, hence were to be excluded from analysis. Consequently, we focused on 35 prefaces for qualitative analysis. Data retrieving was achieved by two means: we, first, searched for publicly available CD manuals. Where manuals were not publicly available, on university homepages, we contacted administrations by email or phone to get access to documents. Data were collected in 2019.

2.2 Data analysis

The data set was archived in NVivo. We then conducted a qualitative thematic analysis (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012; Lueg, 2018). Thematic analysis (TA), as a sensemaking approach, means "identifying and describing both implicit and explicit ideas within the data, that is, themes" (Guest et al., 2012, p. 10) across qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). In our case, purpose of TA is to identify themes pinpointing rationales of CD as officially communicated by universities as well as communicative persuasion strategies for implementation. Analysis steps follow suggestions by Guest et al. (2012): after reading the prefaces, we closely inspected the texts in order to identify possible themes, contrasted and compared them, and then looked out for patterns and structures. Coding of recurrent themes was conducted partly deductively, that is, by using our research question as a start for coding. However, in looking for rationales as grounded in the data, we mainly employed inductive, open, in vivo, coding. Axial coding was employed to systematically develop categories, and to organize them according to relationships between codes. Selective coding was used to integrate and refine sub-themes. Analyzing data using NVivo allowed for administering empirical material in

one single location. 'Nodes' provide the opportunity to collect, in one single place, all information relating to the same thematic unit.

For providing stability and inter-coder reliability, the coding procedure was repeated individually, by each of the authors (Krippendorff, 2013).

3 Conceptual framework

In order to understand how university management does assert governance claims, we employ the concepts of (organizational) field, field struggles, isomorphic change, and legitimacy. Choosing this framework is motivated by obvious changes in the German HE field, and, particularly, by the need of academic top administrations for strategic organizational legitimacy due to the organizational power and research freedom tenured scholars had, historically, been granted.

3.1 *Higher education institutions as organizations: neo-institutionalism and Bourdieusian field theory*

We propose to understand HE as a 'field' in the Bourdieusian sense (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2004). Like any other social field, from this perspective, the scientific field can be seen as an arena in which actors engage in struggles for power and favorable positioning in the social order of rank. Bourdieu stresses "[t]he 'pure' universe of even the 'purest' science is a field like any other, with its distribution of power and its monopolies, its struggles and strategies, interests and profits" (Bourdieu, 1975, p. 19). According to Bourdieu two rationales of social hierarchization exist in parallel, and they pertain to two different forms of social power. One of these rationales is based on intangible, social reputation, while the other one connects to visible professional ranks and the extent of decision-making power. While it can be argued that the so-called scientific community, mainly professors, assigns social rank and position based on the reputation and prestige rationale, administrative and managerial executives strive for power with a view to organizational decision-making. These groups compete for overall power as well as for the legitimate rationale of the field (e.g. Bourdieu, 1988, p. 148, 1989). In order to establish legitimacy for organizational top-down decision making university leaders, in their internal stakeholder communication, employ several communicative strategies.

A suitable conceptual way to connect Bourdieusian field theory to organizational investigations is the approach taken by several neo-institutionalist scholars (Wang, 2016). Organizational fields, from this perspective, describe an ensemble of "those organizations that, in the aggregate, constitute a recognized area of institutional life" (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 148). These fields in general are being depicted as tending towards homogenic practices. This tendency towards homogeneity has been famously labelled 'isomorphism' by DiMaggio and Powell, and has been shown to be at play at universities, too (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Fay & Zavattaro, 2016; Stensaker & Norgård, 2001). Three types of isomorphic change can be distinguished. First, *coercive* isomorphic change is a reaction to direct within-field pressure (e.g., competitors, government). Second, *mimetic* isomorphism describes organizations copying organizational practices perceived as successful (e.g., a *follow the leader strategy*). Third, *normative* isomorphism describes organizational similarities following new professional practices and standards. Such new practices can arise from, i.e., new educational eras or paradigmatic shifts in professions. The driving force behind and – simultaneously a consequence of –, isomorphic strategies is for organizations to establish legitimacy. Legitimacy, in this context, means the acceptance of an organization in its environment as credible and righteous (Deephouse, 1996). In this case, these isomorphic processes are initiated via CD as a symbolic mode of communication.

3.2 *The German higher education system: organizational hierarchy and within-field-stratification*

HE systems are, despite an Europe-wide observable shift towards managerialism, nationally quite unique. The German HE system has some legal and structural particularities, setting this system apart from those of other European countries. Although an increase in top-down decisions of university management can be observed (albeit not without resistance), there still seem to be narrow limits to direct top-down management in German HE. Despite some (slow) extension of power, university management still has hardly any possibility for sanctions. This administrative weakness is the constitutive concomitant of both the legal and the cultural-traditional standing of German professors (Hüther & Krücken, 2013). The German university, traditionally, made professors to custodians of their academic field, a tradition opposed to the widely spread, international, department model allowing for several professorships in the same field. German professors, usually, are tenured civil servants, overseeing their own budget and coordinating subordinated academic and administrative staff. Further, freedom of research is granted both by the Basic Constitutional Law (Grundgesetz für die Bundesrepublik Deutschland, 1949, article 5, section 3) and by the legally granted right of

professors, e.g. in appointing procedures, to outweigh all other university employees ('Professorial majority' / 'Professorenmehrheit'). This concentrates power in few hands, since professors only account for 12 percent of total faculty (Konsortium Bundesbericht Wissenschaftlicher Nachwuchs, 2017). With respect to this unique organizational structure, the German university can be characterized as a "chair-based organization" of "small monopolies in thousands of parts […], since the chair power fragments the formal structure", as Clark puts it (1983, p. 140). Organizational demands and obligations are not supposed to interfere with the professors' freedom of research. Hence, subordinated staff has to follow professorial decisions. In total, the "highly autonomous position of professors in research and teaching" can be considered one of the fundamental principles of German universities (Jansen, 2010, p. XV).

As to the German HE field in total, within-field-stratification is currently undergoing changes, too. Historically, at least formally, all German universities were supposed to be equal in rank and relevance. Differences as to quality in research and teaching were merely attributed to individual faculties, as well as to individual chairholders and their schools of thought. This principle of equality was stunted by the 'Excellence Initiative' launched in 2005. Here, the Federal Government initiated ranking and competition between universities, aiming to promote top-level research at selected German universities. This attempt to create, by external governance, a 'German Ivy League', has been subject of heated debate ever since, as universities were encouraged to compete for funds provided by the Federal Government (e.g. Graf, Reitz, & Möller, 2016; Hartmann, 2006, 2010; Markschies, 2007; Münch, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009). The initiative aims at developing top-level universities and at establishing them as leading institutions in international competition. Upon succeeding in the competition for sparsely distributed funds, universities will be awarded the title 'university of excellence' ('Exzellenzuniversität'). Changing organizational practices and strategies is highly incentivized to get funding. Many university leaders, some openly appreciative, others under protest, complied with this change incentive, and many massively increased their efforts to re-organize the institutional structure in order to gain power and to constitute the university as a successful corporative actor in the struggle for positions. As a consequence of these developments the emergence of an organizational field of universities in a Bourdieusian as well as in a neo-institutional sense can be stated. This has led to a tense situation where governance, in many areas of university life (Lueg, 2018), tries to set the agenda, whilst chairholders continue to practice legally autonomous decision-making. Thus, this setting offers itself to exploring how university leadership does employ communicative strategies in order to achieve compliance from faculty, or, in other words, how management sells "the brand inside" (Mitchell, 2002).

4   Findings: The ambivalent governance claims of German university leaders

In aiming at answering our research question *How does university management communicate the introduction of a new corporate design policy?* we could identify two dominant 'umbrella' themes (s. fig. 1).

Theme one (T1) is *legitimation*. This theme, derived directly from our theoretical framework, is verified and corroborated by our set of data gained in the field.

Theme two (T2) is called *governance*. Under this heading, we subsume all text passages indicating the modus of strategy implementation – such as appealing to loyalty, using logical reasoning, or exerting pressure.

T1, *Legitimation*, covers all attempts by university management to provide explanations of and reasons for the necessity of faculty compliance with the new CD policy. Here, we were able to identify two main *sub-themes* designating two legitimacy-rationales: *external impact / organizational image* and *internal impact / organizational identity*.
First, as to *external impact / organizational image* the presidents' prefaces do emphasize the potential, and positive, impact of CD on external stakeholders. CD, in this vein, is being constructed as a communicative means of ensuring favorable reputation with stakeholder groups (van Riel, 1995). Rhetorically embracing the practice of 'impression management' (DuBrin, 2011; Goffman, 1959), as it is commonly practiced by CEOs in private businesses (Lueg & Nielsen, 2015), presidents point to the prospect of the organization developing into a competitive 'strategic brand' in order to succeed in the 'university market'. Second, the sub-theme *internal impact / organizational identity*, is being constituted by the claim that CD should have an impact on the internal constitution of the university as an organization. Complying with, and applying, the new CD policy is projected as a force of social cohesion and integration. CD is supposed to draw faculty together by means of visual symbolism; and, according to the presidential prefaces, this will foster organizational identification. In this case, we consider CD to be a visual mode of communication that is supposed to have an impact on the universities perception externally and internally.

In contrast to T1, T2, *governance*, encompasses the managerial means employed by presidents in implementing their policies. Here, we do not focus on CD as communication but on the communicative strategies used to persuade the

university members of using CD. We collected, from the overall data, all statements indicative of the respective governance style exercised. In doing so, we constructed four sub-themes, each representing a different aspect of governance:

1) Development process: the president recapitulates how the CD, both on the artistic and on the more strategic level, had been developed in the first place.
Example: "Eight interdisciplinary workshops provided the conceptual base. From here, developing the Corporate Design relies on substantial semantic specifications." (preface 31)[1]

2) *Degree of regulation*: the president elaborates on how binding or flexible individual design specifications are for faculty.
Examples:
„[…] Corporate Design, allowing for ample opportunity to express individualism, at the same time making visible the greater institution of the university." (preface 15)

3) *Degree of obligation*: the president elaborates on how obligatory applying the overall set of CD rules is for faculty communication.
Examples:
„I call on all members of university XY to employ, consistently, the Corporate Design." (preface 4)
„I appreciate your cooperation […]." (preface 1)

4) *Persuasion*: The president employs various arguments intended to direct faculty into compliance.
Examples:
„[…] you will be committing to a unity, within the plurality of the university." (preface 19)
„A clearly structured Corporate Design will foster positive effects and synergies for all involved." (preface15)

Figure 1: Overview of dominant themes 'T1: legitimation' and 'T2: governance' with respective sub-themes as constructed from the CD manual sample (n=35).
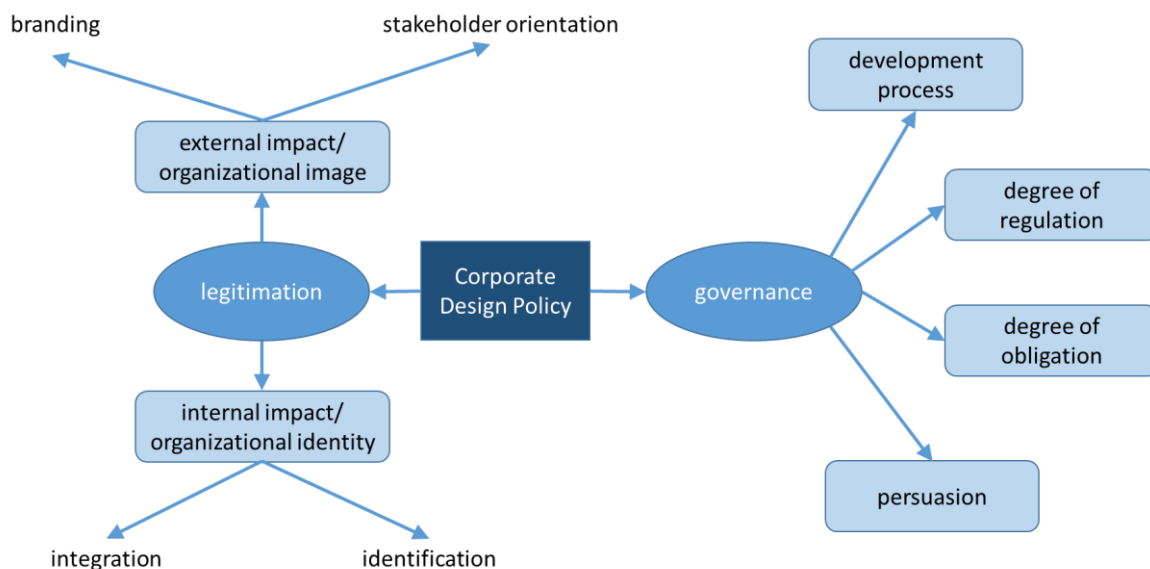
4.1   The first umbrella theme: legitimation

A closer look at the sub-themes of umbrella theme *legitimation* (T1) reveals rational arguments chosen, by presidents, in order to justify the necessity of the new policy. With regard to this issue, a clearly economized wording prevails.

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[1] All quotations have been translated by the authors from the original German as layman translations, A.G. & K.L.

Arguments refer to the emergence of a 'university market' and emphasize that establishing a specific and unique profile may help visualize the university's unique selling points. In nearly two-thirds of the analyzed CD manuals, we find passages stating that CD is meant to support the university's unique 'brand'. Two passages are exemplary for this issue: "Through the consistent implementation of corporate design, the university becomes a distinctive brand" (preface 19) or "A university with a good reputation becomes a unique and distinctive brand" (preface 31).

Moreover, we identify statements pointing to the necessity of stakeholder orientation (Mitchell, Agle, & Wood, 1997), and we determine three groups of such stakeholders, which seem to matter most to the presidents. The first vital stakeholder group as described by the presidents consists of *other universities*. CD is to help position the home university vis-à-vis competitors. The notion of *other universities* as stakeholders comprises both other national and internationally located universities. In more than half of the prefaces, we find references to a competitive, stratified, almost global university landscape:

"The University XY competes with other universities, on an educational market, on a national and international level. A distinctive and unique external appearance is an indispensable element to succeed in an increasingly fierce competitive environment" (preface 14).

A second stakeholder group deemed relevant by university presidents can be summarized by the intangible, not very clear notion of *the market*. University presidents refer to actors representing groups not directly university-related as 'market', or as 'customers'. One university president showcases his university as a "think tank […] which, being a highly reputed scientific institution, provides qualified services to politics, business, culture, and society" (preface 8). In other prefaces, we find more of such stark expressions of orientation towards university economization. CD is a means of stakeholder communication; it is intended to "communicate a contemporary self-image of more 'customer accessibility', 'customer service' and 'market-orientation'" (preface 31).

A third stakeholder group is that of potential students and employees, lumped together. CD is to strengthen 'customer loyalty' and increase attractiveness for future students and employees.

"In times of growing competition for students and decreasing financial resources, it is particularly important to demonstrate the uniqueness and range of activities and services of a university" (preface 19).

Here, again, the relevant social actors are named 'customers': "[t]he new Corporate Design has the enormous chance to foster a stronger 'customer loyalty' (e.g. by students, the economy, the general public)" (preface 31).

Now, as to CD statements regarding external impact, it is obvious that they follow a logic of argumentation, which is clearly contingent upon economic developments. University leaders depict universities as competitive organizations to engage in for market competition. This perspective stands in stark contrast to the traditionally dominant view, held in German academia, of universities primarily being places of research, and communities of teachers and learners. To sum up, the sub-theme *external impact / organizational image* mainly centers on impression management, by university presidents, responding to a sweeping *stakeholder* logic, and on the practice of university *branding*.

Meanwhile, the sub-theme *internal impact / organizational identity* focusses on rationales aiming at internal effects. Such effects, as envisioned by university leaders, are to be organizational *integration*, on the one hand, and *identification*, on the other hand. The effect of organizational *integration*, when employing the new CD policy, is to integrate, potentially, the various, hitherto structurally independent, university units, such as faculties, institutes, and departments. The use of a coherent visual design is to lead to a coherent entity, that is, a corporation. The strong tradition of chairholder autonomy (Clark, 1983) has led to a rather fragmented organization. In promoting the highly touchy rationale of incorporating these fragments, tone and focal point employed in the presidents' prefaces vary. Some presidents put emphasis on reassuring faculty that 'their' sub-units, that is, inter alia, professorial centers, seminars and chairs, will not be harmed. Faculty is reassured that own distinct visuals may potentially co-exist, and that they will not be abolished as visible organizational units. A diplomatic approach to this sensitive subject is represented by one passage, in a CD manual, stating that

"[a] university is an association of great diversity. Single sub-units are largely self-sufficient and independent in their external communication. From outside, however, a university is perceived as a whole in the first instance and each sub-unit is seen as a part of the university in its totality. A consistent visual imagery should promote this natural perception" (preface 12).

Other prefaces, in contrast, are less conciliatory; rather individual units are to consider themselves integral, interdependent parts of the organization. This sentiment is best expressed by this passage:

"Creative individual achievements in research and teaching […] are not to be seen as isolated, but as part of the overall institution supporting them" (preface 21).

Now, the envisioned internal effect of *identification* relates to the agent level instead of to the overall corporatization of the university. Passages touching upon this sub-theme try to appeal to a sense of employee loyalty in fostering the organizational identity on the agent level (Cornelissen, Haslam, & Balmer, 2007; Graf, 2019). CD is described as a means to promote collective consciousness and social cohesion of single faculty members. This collective consciousness is evoked, sometimes, as already being present, and sometimes as an attitude the organization is in need

of. In the first case, CD is propositioned to serve as a visual expression of this current collective consciousness: "That is how the University XY is like and wants to present itself. The new corporate design reflects how we feel" (preface 23). This quotation shows university management insinuating an existing organizational identity and identification with the university, a common ground merely being visualized by the new CD. A second example floats the idea of CD actually being able to create such group identification: "I am convinced that this manual will help you to identify with University XY" (preface 10).

We observe that CD is intended, by university management, to contribute to a relatively novel way of constituting universities as organizations. Management proposes the idea that CD, as the manifestation of corporate identity, will foster the university's corporate image and reputation, and therefore its 'market position' as well as strengthen internal stakeholder commitment (Cornelissen, 2004).

4.2   *The second umbrella theme: governance*

The second umbrella theme, *governance*, shows the range in tone of voice applied by university management. Tone of voice ranges from highly polite and faculty involving messages, to strict and direct top-down orders to ambiguous language. This variety points to an awareness of somewhat limited options for direct, top-down decision-making. This theme comprises four sub-themes. First, the CD prefaces, often, incorporate passages on the *development procedure* of the new policy, that is, on how it emerged, with a view to faculty involvement and social process management. The social development process can roughly be grouped into bottom-up and top-down models. The description of said bottom-up models suggests a sense of employee participation and involvement. Numerous university members, it is emphasized, had been involved, and an extensive discussion process had been initiated. Such reporting of participatory governance style is sometimes being accompanied by reference to employee surveys. Also, in the same vein, presidents point to the role of self-governed committees, such as the university council. Passages making reference to top-down governance are meant to exert authority when stating, for example, that "the university leaders made this decision when developing the new Corporate Design" (preface 14).

We identify a similar set-up regarding the *degree of regulation* as the second sub-theme of *governance*. Here, statements vary between emphasizing freedom and flexibility for faculty members' use, and laying out strict and obligatory rules in handling the new policies. There are presidential prefaces that try to cater to sentiments of autonomy when emphasizing that the "new design will give you an opportunity [...] with a lot of creative leeway for individual solutions" (preface 2). Other presidents do resort to strict orders and to addressing embargos on use of individual visuals: "discrete logos for chairs, institutes, centers, departments, research projects, etc., are not allowed" (preface 27).

Exploring the third sub-theme, the *degree of obligation,* does allow for the most distinct insights into university management's claim to leadership. Presidents, in their prefaces, represent very different approaches to how they try to put the new CD into practice. Some presidents chose a rather collegial form when, e.g., expressing: "I would like to advertise for it and hope for your support" (preface 28). Others represent a clear top-down instruction: "[t]he manual defines binding rules that are obligatory to all employees of University XY" (preface 3).

Finally, we identify *persuasion* as a fourth sub-theme: here, we collect those passages that attempt to talk faculty into using the new CD beyond the logics of coercion. We find various arguments trying to appeal to a logos-level of communication: some presidents emphasize the prospect that CD norms will "spare needless preparatory work and time-consuming detailed decisions" (preface 30). Meanwhile, other presidents operate on an ethos-level: faculty "should use the Corporate Design out of inner conviction" (preface 10). Even stronger wording is deployed by one university president elevating the application of CD onto the heights of "a university member's duty of loyalty" (preface 27).

In contrast to the first umbrella theme, here, we focus on managements' communicative strategies to convince university members of actually using CD. Uncoated top-down orders might not yet be fully legitimized by the structural hierarchy with German universities, however, university leadership strongly nudges faculty to apply CD.

5   Discussion

5.1   *Limitations*

At the outset of this discussion, we point to the several limitations of this study, and these limitations' impact on future research. First, our study is bound to the specific culture and organization in German HE. This environment grants substantial discretion to chaired professors. From there, further generalization should be made with care. Other

European university systems grant less power to the single professorship but may have outpaced the German academic field in terms of implementing managerialism. This affects, obviously, processes of introducing and enforcing policy changes. CD implementation is only one of many possible examples. Differences in management would also affect the legitimacy strategies and rhetoric chosen by university leadership. However, we argue that it is this very setting, German academia, indeed, that makes way for understanding how a publicly governed organizational field can change towards NPM and managerialism by means of strategic communication. The German context demonstrates, through the uniqueness of tensions at hand, how isomorphism evokes changes that require the complicity of faculty, which, in the course of organizational changes, might be deprived of power.

Second, we emphasize this study being an ongoing enterprise. We will continue to select further CD manuals until full theoretical saturation (Saunders et al., 2018) is reached.

Third, in analyzing German CD manuals we solely focus on the discursive and narrative aspects of ongoing changes. Given our research design, we are not able to assess the extent of CD implementation in practice. Further investigations are necessary. In particular, there is need of insight into degrees of compliance, or non-compliance, of university members, with university management requirements. Nevertheless, what we can observe, irrespective of national boundaries, is ongoing efforts of university leaders to gain power – if on a discursive level, mostly, and for the time being.

Finally, we hold that there is abundant room for progress in both determining how a Bourdieusian and a neo-institutionalist perspective can help decoding the massive ongoing change towards managerialism. The Bourdieusian concept of 'symbolic violence', inter alia, has not been employed by us in this paper; however, we venture to propose that leadership soliciting loyalty from faculty, via CD prefaces, does respond to the core of that very concept. For Bourdieu symbolic violence means "the monopoly of legitimate nomination, the dominant viewpoint which, in gaining recognition as the legitimate viewpoint, causes its truth as a specific, situated, dated viewpoint to be misconstrued" (Bourdieu, 1988, p. 26). Additionally, the Bourdieusian concept of 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1998) in the organizational context of universities, regarding university leadership as well as university members, could be explored more precisely in order to understand the relationship between structural setting and individual behavior.

Still, despite limitations and omissions, our analysis of CD manuals as showcases of strategic communication, we propose, does shed light on how the crucial change of power and governance structures at universities is being communicated, and possibly, and slowly, legitimized by means of those communicative practices.

5.2   Conclusion: the subtle governance of change

Science and academia – not restricted to the German setting – are currently changing fundamentally, this change evoking new challenges for universities. Due to the increasing implementation of NPM, and reinforced by science policy measures, such as the governmental 'Excellence Initiative', the organizational field of German universities is being increasingly stratified. Both on a national and an international level, universities have to position themselves under conditions of politically induced competition. In the course of this change, (German) universities are increasingly admonished to self-transform into 'entrepreneurial universities' (Aulenbacher, Binner, Riegraf, & Weber, 2016; Clark, 2001; Maasen & Weingart, 2006). This transformation, urged by government and within-field-competition, stands in contrast to the previous notion of universities being rather 'incomplete' professional organizations (Clark, 1983; Stock & Wernet, 2005) mostly providing an overarching infrastructure for individually working faculty.

This transformation process is shaped by the state withdrawing from a 'nanny state' regulation, and by the expansion of legal autonomy of universities (e.g. Hüther, 2010). This process runs parallel to the expansion of power for individual decision-makers in the universities' top-positions, potentially allowing for ad-hoc implementation of managerial policies (Grande et al., 2013; Hüther & Krücken, 2011; Schimank, 2005) and thus for prompting changes in governance structures and rationales. Irrespective of this autonomy expansion, the assertive power of German university management remains highly limited, as there are hardly any sanction instruments available. In order to change faculty practices, university management has to resort to more subtle governance instruments. University leaders attempt to assert their governance claim by referring to legitimizing arguments and by appealing to faculty's loyalty (Graf, 2019). The implementation of CD policies at universities can be seen as a striking example of such soft governance instruments.

This paper investigated the question *how university governance communicates the introduction of a new corporate design* policy.

Top-down management by university leaders, in German universities, is still highly limited. University presidents, in attempting to convince faculty, resort to the strategy of communicating via a preface. Presidents put forward various arguments, referring, for instance, to external stakeholder requirements. Various kinds of persuasion strategies, in terms

of option or coercion, are employed in order to convince university members of using CD. This relatively cautious behavior reflects the managerial ambivalence and the limited power of the German university president.
These diverging statements on how optional or coercive CD specifications are, demonstrate a paradoxical relation between communicating a claim ('talk', Brunsson, 2002) and the actual practice of governance ('walk').

On the one hand, with regard to *'legitimization'* arguments (T1, s. earlier), the analysis of CD manuals reveal CD to be conceived as an important (marketing) instrument in the struggle of positions between universities. University presidents strongly refer to urgent necessities as to enhancing the market value of 'their' university. In external communication, CD is to support the emergence and amplification of the university image. CD promotes the reputation of the university as a 'unique' organization with a 'unique' profile of service and activities, as well as a competitive brand geared to succeed – eagerly presented as it is, on the university market, by university managements. Examples adduced, above, clearly illustrate that economic logic, referring to the notion of an 'entrepreneurial university' (Clark, 2001, 2004), has become an inherent part of university management legitimation strategies.

On the other hand, it becomes apparent that CD is not only an important marketing instrument as perceived by university management, but at the same time serves as a 'soft' governance instrument aiming at long-term, normative change (normative isomorphism). By way of comprehensive CD implementation, the university members are to be governed in their practice as well as in their thinking in order to constitute the university as a "full organization" (Kloke & Krücken, 2012; Lange & Schimank, 2007; Stock, 2004, 2006; Wilkesmann & Schmid, 2012). Trying to exert impact on group habitus (Bourdieu, 1998; Elias, 1987) establishes the basis for organizational changes of the normative kind. Internally, the implementation of CD is intended to integrate sub-units, and to commit them to an overall structure; moreover, CD is to reinforce cohesion and identification of university members with the organization. In the long run, successful implementation of these governance practices is to establish the university as a 'governable' corporate entity.

5.3   *Theoretical and practical implications: from mimetic to coercive isomorphism*

Quite often we have found university management proposing CD for visualizing university uniqueness. Yet, the very homogeneity of the CD manuals is striking. First, our sample universities do implement CD policies in a near-collective fashion, almost simultaneously, in a relatively short period of time. Second, almost all of our sample manuals are published with a presidential preface, demonstrating the weight and relevance of this special communication policy. Third, the rationales of legitimation brought forward in the presidents' prefaces are strikingly similar, as well. This homogeneity is being interpreted, by us, as mimetic isomorphism as brought forward by neo-institutionalist theory (DiMaggio & Powell 1983).
As to a Bourdieusian outlook, a stratified HE landscape in Germany is just emerging, and, in consequence, the (explicit and implicit) rules for the positioning within this new field of universities, and the types of capital and legitimate accumulation strategies at stake are not yet clear. Apparently, university management compensates this situation of uncertainty by imitating other field players, that is, other universities. The logic of 'Keeping up with the Joneses' is evidently visible in the CD manuals. At the same time, the 'soft' introduction of CD policies paves the way for a long-term normative isomorphism in how universities are organized and constituted. Homogenized professional standards (viz. a normative isomorphism) may, and probably are intended to, ensue. With reference to the necessity of positioning the university preferably at the top of a stratified university field, they not only respond to an already existing new paradigm but rather actively create and push this change toward a more competitive university landscape and entrepreneurial university type in the sense of an academic capitalism (Münch, 2011; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004).
The implementation of CD as a soft governance instrument in this context is to be understood as one element that evokes a shift of the university members' habitus in the direction of an 'organizational habitus' (Janning, 2004). In the long run, this shift can then lead to a fundamental alteration of the field's nomos. Specific perceptions and practices will become self-evident and indispensable for future generations. Traditional power structures, including autonomy of professors, might be successively transformed into a management-centered power structure. By means of soft, communicative governance instruments, such as the legitimizing and persuasive implementation of CD policies, new power structures can be established, paving the way for different kinds of truly top-down implemented, coercive isomorphism.

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