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# Strategic management and shaping cultural transformation processes at German Universities – Transfer and implementation of a cohesion approach of culture

*Strategisches Management und die Gestaltung kultureller Transformationsprozesse an deutschen Universitäten – Übertragung und Anwendungsmöglichkeiten eines kohäsionsorientierten Kulturansatzes*

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## *Abstract (English)*

*University culture is seen as one of the main obstacles to the successful implementation of the process of strategic university management. Although existing organisational approaches of changing processes give theoretical insight, they fail to consider the cultural perspective and how change can be implemented successfully. This article focuses on a cultural approach and therefore introduces a cohesive cultural model to the Higher Education (HE) context. It will be shown how this paradigm can be used in strategic management processes at universities and how it can support them. It therefore offers an approach that is applicable to the practice of university management.*

*Keywords: Higher Education Management, New Public Management, Organisational Culture, Communication, Cohesion*

## *Abstract (Deutsch)*

*Universitätskultur kann als eines der Haupthindernisse für die Implementierung von strategischem Management an Universitäten angesehen werden. Vorhandene Ansätze der Organisationsforschung betrachten zwar Veränderungsprozesse, diskutieren die Rolle der Organisationskultur jedoch nur am Rande und fragen nicht nach dem Wie der Umsetzung einer solchen organisationalen Veränderung. Dieser Artikel betrachtet strategisches Management an Universitäten aus einer kulturtheoretischen Perspektive und überträgt das kohäsionsorientierte Organisationsmodell auf den Hochschulkontext. Es wird gezeigt, wie dieses Modell strategische Prozesse unterstützen kann, so dass es einen praktischen Nutzen für das Hochschulmanagement bietet.*

*Schlagwörter: Hochschulmanagement, New Public Management, Organisationskultur, Kommunikation, Hochschulforschung, Universität*

# 1. Economic competition in the German higher education (HE) system

German and other European universities are undergoing an economically motivated process of change, characterised by intense competition between and within higher education institutions (HEIs) (Wissenschaftsrat 1985). In addition, a change in governance has occurred, partly as a response to the idea of competition and partly to diminish other deficits in the German HE system. This process of change is reflected in the introduction of New Public Management (NPM) to universities from the early 1990s. The introduction of NPM, the pressure of having or wanting to act competitively and the lack of more appropriate alternatives led to traditional management methods being transferred to the HE system (e. g. Kotler / Murphy 1981, Scheidegger 2001, Trogele 1997, v. Gagern 2009). For instance, German universities attempt to act strategically, as reflected in such strategic processes as mission statements, profile development and the national excellence initiative (Berthold 2011:51ff.). This conglomerate of competitive alignment, the use of strategic management methods and the change of certain traditional assumptions due to NPM leads to an intense cultural transformation process in the HE system, as well as within universities.

Traditional approaches of organisational theory, such as change management and organisational learning, view organisational culture as a relevant factor in accompanying and affecting change processes, due to its ability to be shaped (Bea / Haas 2004:458ff., Bamberger / Wrona 2004:307ff.). At German universities, culture plays a significant role (Schönwald 2007:108ff.) since, compared to companies, they have a highly heterogeneous structure (Clark 1980, Weick 1976), professors are relatively autonomous (Schimank 2005) and decision-making processes are participatory and consensus-oriented (Breitbach 2009)<sup>1</sup>: “Because of the distinctive nature of academic institutions, organizational culture plays a significant role

in their functioning” (Dill 1982:307). The question therefore arises how the critical factor of university culture can be aptly described and make an impact on strategic management processes; after all, “[...] a positive organisational culture which embraces the institution and motivates the staff can enable a university to ‘punch above its weight’ in competitive situations” (Shattock 2000:101). Organisational theory offers only inadequate answers, since it regards organisational culture from a functional perspective, which fails to do justice to the relevance of university culture, due to its emphasis on such aspects as structural processes.

It seems pertinent and essential to concentrate on strategic change processes and newly developing cultural structures:

- Even if counteractive measures exist, the system of economic competition has penetrated society to such an extent that there is no turning back. Universities therefore have to face these new conditions and, most importantly, be in a position to shape them.
- Since strategic management is quite a new phenomenon, universities are confronted by a lack of routines in taking action and problem-solving, which are currently developing. Management approaches from the private or non-profit sector can only be applied to HE to a limited extent, necessitating scientific exploration. The subsequent preparation and dissemination should give decision-makers in HE practical and adequate tools to deal with strategic processes.
- HEIs require routines that do justice to their special type of organisation and which are not implemented despite a lack of fit. In other words, universities require self-emergent routines.

This paper aims to introduce a culture paradigm that breaks with traditional assumptions and that is suitable for describing the HE context for this very reason. First of all, traditional culture

paradigms will be criticised and the state of the art of the discourse on the concept of university culture presented. The main focus of the paper is to describe a cohesion-oriented culture paradigm and to transfer it to the HE context for the first time. The paper can therefore be characterised by explaining and developing a theoretical discourse in the field of university culture. In the second part, it will be shown how the model can support transformation processes at HEIs. To this end, the potential of a cultural cohesion model for practitioners in Germany and in the international context will be highlighted.

## 2. From homogeneity to heterogeneity in the cultural model

### 2.1. Culture as a communicative concept

Based on the Latin term *communicare* in the sense of “doing something collaboratively” (Bolten 2000:1), communication can be understood as a “process of collaborative action” (Bolten 2000:2) or as “reciprocal interaction between content and relation aspects” (Watzlawick / Beavin / Jackson 1969:55). The action and knowledge of groups therefore emerges from communicative self-understanding, and is the result of century-long processes. At the same time, this stock of knowledge and options for action are modified in the current socialisation context; culture is to be *updated* (Bolten 2000). This leads to the definition of culture as the product of communicative processes (ibid.). The broadest possible culture concept should be added to supplement the concept of culture as communication at a content level: “Culture [...] is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (Tylor 1871:1). This definition accentuates the shared habits of a community, but does not say anything about its degree of homogeneity (Rathje 2009b:16) which – as we shall see in the following – is a relevant point for

developing a cohesion-oriented culture model.

### 2.2. Criticism of the coherence approach to culture

In the coherence approach to culture, the shared habits provide a basis for the alleged affiliation to a cultural community. They end at the boundaries of this collective, and allow only a small degree of overlapping (Rathje 2009a:90); there is congruence at the cultural and collective level. This implies that affiliation to a certain community suggests affiliation to other (special) communities. The issue of affiliation can also be highlighted as follows: a person may become a member of an association by paying a fee, but he is not necessarily obliged to share its habits. Congruence at the cultural and collective level must therefore be doubted. The main criticism of traditional culture concepts is the implicit homogeneity (Welsch 1994:3f.) or content coherence (Rathje 2009a:90). To put it bluntly, one would be able to conclude specific cultural habits from this assumption of collective affiliation.

The question of differentness and the associated differentiation between the Own and the Alien is also criticised concerning classic culture models. Such a differentiation always implies a normative assessment that – and this must surely be one of the new culture model’s achievements – is no longer an appropriate description of individuals and their collectives in postmodern tradition (Welsch 1994).

The idea of the boundary of cultures, usually based on assumptions of homogeneity or the accentuation of the own and the alien, goes back to the national state-oriented discourse of the culture concept. It implies an ethnic differentiation between cultures, and is therefore not only inapplicable for descriptions, but must also been understood as “normatively dangerous” (Welsch 1994:4).

Concerning the affiliation of cultural associations, border coherence is stressed in traditional concepts of culture. It describes “explicit [...] borders as well

as low permeability between collectives and, therefore, cultures” (Rathje 2009a:90). This in turn implies a primary collective affiliation of individuals, and must be viewed critically because the environment is characterised by an increasing diversification and overlapping of cultural groups (Heizmann 2008:37).

The role of the individual as the smallest entity of a community is often neglected in traditional culture paradigms. Each member is individual with regard to his habits, and processes cognitive impulses on an individualised basis (Assmann 1992 as cited in Rathje 2009b:93), which is why the homogeneity of a community is subject to tight limits.

Concepts that aim to describe heterogeneous groups appropriately should detach themselves from the desire for homogeneity regarding content, structure and congruence and should instead find possibilities to describe heterogeneity and individuals’ affiliation to different cultural communities appropriately.

In the following, organisational culture is defined as a special kind of culture (Rathje 2004:60ff.). It is generated by the communicative processes that take place between the members of an organisation and its environment, and is shaped by certain habits.

### 2.3. University culture – state of the art

Martin identifies three main perspectives of the culture-oriented research of organisations: integration, differentiation and fragmentation (Martin 1992). The integrative perspective is based on a consensus and homogeneous orientation of a cultural community and assumes consistency regarding their habits (Smerek 2010:384). The perspective of differentiation accepts differences and no longer assumes consensus at the level of the entire organisation, but within subcultures of an organisation. Fragmentation highlights ambiguity, which includes “multiple, contradictory meanings that are simultaneously true and false, paradoxes, ironies, and irrec-

oncilable tensions” (Martin 2002:110). Consequently, there is no common, homogeneous core; instead, culture arises from shared habits (Smerek 2010:384). Whilst the first two perspectives share the same basic assumption – a homogeneous core – the fragmentation perspective has an extra position. Since the concept of ambiguity is difficult to conceptualise, the fragmentation perspective is the least pursued perspective within the field of HE organisational culture research (Smerek 2010:402). If we consider research into culture and criticism of homogeneous-oriented cultural approaches, the fragmentation perspective characterises the modern, networked and globalised world and the complex (German) HEI (Clark 1981 as cited in Dill 1982) much more accurately and adequately. The difficulty of conceptualisation must not act as an excuse for not dealing with the topic and developing appropriate models.

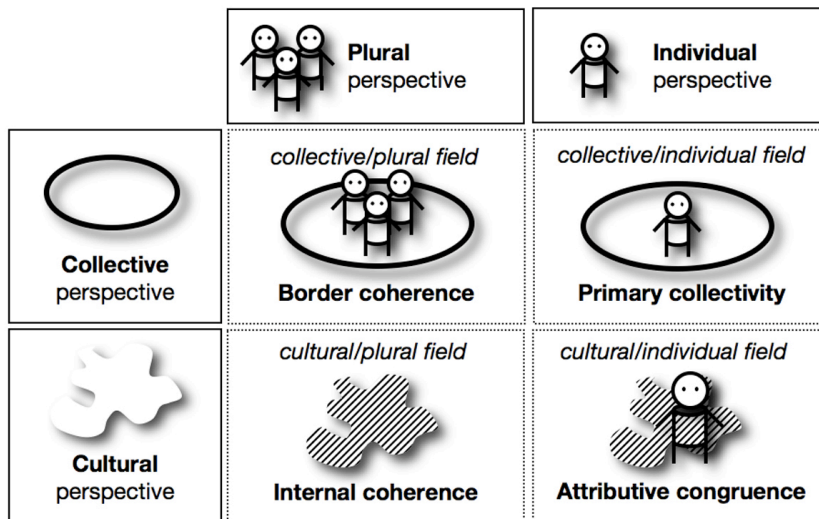
Another noticeable aspect of university culture research is its fragmentation into different levels and the individual consideration thereof, such as the levels of the entire organisation, faculties and disciplinary culture (Välilmaa 2008:15ff., Maassen 1996).

University culture research can be characterised as follows:

- consensus orientation of the models,
- little research into fragmentation models,
- fragmentation of research topics due to the heterogeneous structure of HEIs.

The aim of this article is therefore, following this criticism of research into university culture, to

- reveal the options that enable the heterogeneous and cohesive culture model to be transferred to the university context,
- advance the research into culture models of the fragmentation perspective and



Exh. 1: Matrix model of culture. Source: Rathje 2010:169.

- dissolve the fragmentation of research topics on university culture by applying an integrative approach.

In addition, the practical benefits of the cohesion model of university culture for university managers and practitioners shall be demonstrated.

### 3. The cohesion-oriented culture model – Description and implementation

#### 3.1. Difference-oriented culture concept

Although subcultural and intercultural models (Jochheim 2002, Bolten 2010) or the concept of cross-cultural concepts (Welsch 1994) attempt to respond to such criticism, these approaches cannot counter the criticism with regard to the culture models either. A cultural concept that assumes contextual difference, and hence breaks with the traditional assumptions of homogeneity and coherence, was introduced into the cultural theory discourse by Rathje (2009a).

The main assumption here, adapted from Hansen (2009), is the detachment of the collective (culture bearers) and the content (cultural habits). This allows individuals to have different habits, but to be members of one and the same collective (Hansen 2009). The cohesion culture approach therefore provides

an explanation of the integration of heterogeneous views within a cultural community.

In accordance with Martin (1992, 2002), all three perspectives should be taken into account when researching university culture. He argues that elements of all three can be found in an organisation (Smerek 2010:384). However, Rathje does not accept any homogeneous element and accepts only fragmentation in cultural communities (Rathje 2009a:84ff.). Martin furthermore speaks of ambiguity as the sharing, the bonding element. Rathje, once again, goes even further: only the knowledge of ambiguity, familiarity with it, enables culture and community to emerge, not ambiguity itself (Rathje 2009a:87).

In addition, Rathje includes an individual and pluralistic level, taking into account the criticism of homogeneous-oriented models, i. e. the lack of an explanation of individuality. A matrix model of culture (See Exh. 1) is produced which can help describe communities (Rathje 2010:167f.).

The field of differentiation accentuates the existence of different habits within a collective; it shows that culture is heterogeneous.

- Multicollectivity assumes that individuals belong not only to one primary collective, but are members of different collectives. One basic assumption is therefore that there must not be congruency between the cultural community and the collective. Rather, cultural communities overlap, enabling stability to evolve.
- Border coherence is not porous, but rigid: it is not the knowledge of cultural habits that decides who belongs to a community, but clear parameters (board committee members versus non-board committee members).
- The field of radical individuality, as an important enhancement to traditional coherence approaches, does justice to the individual as the small-

lest and most individual parameter of a community. Since an individual is part of multiple collectives and knows about their different habits, it must be concluded that the cognitive processing of these experiences leads to a radical individuality.

The question of affiliation to a cultural community cannot be answered by clear parameters as at the collective level, but rather is an ongoing process. The crucial point is the knowledge of and familiarity with the cultural habits (Rathje 2009a:95). "It is sufficient to know about the habits of a cultural community to be member of it. To be a member of a collective, strong criteria have to be achieved" (Rathje 2009a:95).

Universities are entities in which the prevailing culture is strongly influenced by communication processes (committee work, necessity of consensus, collegiality) (e. g. in Schimank 2001). In the sense of the communication-based culture concept, which understands culture as a product of communicative processes (Section 2.1), the presented culture concept can adequately describe the university as a space characterised by communication.

### 3.2. Cohesion-oriented culture model

Despite previous transformations, mainly in connection with NPM, there are still few interuniversity differences concerning structure, autonomy and decision-making processes. Why do some universities still cope better with such transformation processes? How do these differences evolve? And what is important when dealing with cohesion-oriented university culture when accompanying such processes?

If universities distinguish themselves by contextual difference and structural heterogeneity, the questions arise 1) what keeps the community together and 2) how can the envisaged targets be achieved despite heterogeneity and difference. The term of cohesion extending the difference-oriented culture model

can provide the critical explanation approach here.

To answer Question 1) regarding the cohesion of a heterogeneous and different community, the contrasting terms of coherence and cohesion can be used (Rathje 2009b). "Coherence refers to the inner coherence qua conclusiveness and consistency of certain entities" (Bolten 2010:46). However, with regard to the difference-oriented culture concept, it must be stated that heterogeneous communities are not kept together by conclusiveness and consistence, but by cohesion (Rathje 2009b:21). Cohesion "[...] describes [...] the – absolutely separable – bond between entities, such as molecules" (Bolten 2010:46) and hence describes a stable yet dynamic connection between elements within a certain time frame. This means that the underlying elements of the community may be heterogeneous and different, and can be held together by a bond – yet to be specified.

The question as to the characteristics of the cohesive bond leads us directly to Question 2) posed above, regarding how culturally heterogeneous communities can achieve the intended targets. The *bond* functions in terms of a psychological element, and is understood to be "the feeling of shared identity that bonds group members together," (e. g. Festinger / Schachter / Back 1950:164 as cited in Rathje 2009b:7). Consequently, the members of a group develop an identification with the community or its objectives.

This identification can lead to an increased level of motivation and willingness to perform with regard to the group's objectives (Rathje 2009b:7). The extent of a group's heterogeneity, which can be considered as the greatest possible via the difference-oriented concept of culture, appears to have no impact on the cohesion of an organisational culture (Rathje 2004:301), and is consequently not an impediment, but an essential, positive element to be included, according to Rathje's model.

The further question now arises as to how an identification necessary for a

change process can be developed. This takes place by means of cultural dynamics that have an identification-forming effect, within the meaning of communicative processes.

In a survey on a German company operating in Thailand, Rathje identifies communicative processes that advance the development of cohesion (Rathje 2009b). Not only do dynamics leading to homogeneity in thinking and acting evolve – which is one of the assumptions – there are also dynamics that lead to the development and / or reinforcement of differences (Rathje 2009b:21f.). Besides the homogenising dynamics of adaptation and integration, dynamics of defence (the refusal to adopt specific thinking and behaviour patterns as a protective mechanism) and hybridisation (the encouragement of differing thought and behaviour patterns without adopting them). It is important to realise that it is not the homogenising elements that stabilise cohesion, but the balance of all four identified dynamics (Rathje 2009b:24).

The author considers the transfer of the concept of cohesion and cultural dynamics to the university context to be promising. It enables the organisation *university*

- to retain its structural heterogeneity and cultural difference and
- a specific development of cohesion to be established for the specific university context, by means of the cohesive bond.

At the same time, with regard to Rathje's research results, it must be assumed that universities can shape transformation processes more effectively when the respective groups are aware of the cultural dynamics that create cohesion and these are applied carefully throughout the process.

## 4. Discussion: Cultural dynamics at universities

The different results of university transformation processes can therefore be attributed to the understanding of a university's respective culture, and how this is dealt with. A difference-oriented understanding of culture makes it easier to understand universities as that which they have become by way of their history: an institution characterised by contextual difference, multicollectivity and radical individuality. The associated issues of the cohesion of the community and the achieving of common goals can be answered by the cohesion approach as a *bond* for forming identification. The concept of communicative dynamics presented above helps this cohesive bond to be developed.

Elaborating on the characteristics of current research into university culture, as presented in the opening section, it can be stated that the model is capable of cancelling out the aforementioned fragmentation. It is no longer necessary to use different culture and model approaches to describe university culture at various levels, in various areas and in different forms. It can be used as a superordinate university culture approach that manages to do justice to the heterogeneity of universities. The model can therefore soften Välimaa's rationale, who fears that "[...] it could be argued that the analysis of institutional cultures excludes the dimension that is important for the functioning of the academic communities: the disciplinary cultures" (Välimaa 1998:130).

What is more, the model reacts to the criticism raised by Martin (1992) that culture-theoretical research deals too little with fragmenting culture approaches owing to the difficulty of conceptualising ambiguity. Rathje's crucial development to integrate this ambiguity is the differentiation between the culture and the collective level or the individual and the plural perspective (Rathje 2009a). In addition, the model manages to do justice to the cultural complexity of a university, and does not describe the context in a normative



manner, but allows for heterogeneous habits. This is the main strength of the model over classic models of organisational culture, which assume consensus and homogeneity and view these aspects as the condition for change and target achievement processes (Kreikebaum / Behnam / Gilbert 2011:168).

However, the model fails to reveal which objects cohesion can develop from. It can be concluded from the approach of radical individuality that identification forming is also a highly individual process. The acceptance of different habits and attitudes reinforces this approach even further. Such objects, demonstrated as examples, can be the identity as a researcher, the reference to a certain topic or one's personal attitude towards the content of the transformation process. Whether the development of an identity is appropriate and pertinent at the university level, as currently promoted in many places, must therefore be questioned.

The cohesive culture model and the concept of cultural dynamics is characterised by a high degree of generality, which is why it is ideal for transferral to other contexts, such as the non-profit or HE area. At the same time, the specific manifestation of the dynamics is highly context-sensitive since, for example, the structure and culture of the university contexts differs considerably to private enterprises. For this reason, the four dynamics explored by Rathje cannot be transferred easily to the university context. Consequently, the mission for further research into the university context and other areas to which the model is to be applied is to explore specific dynamics.

Following the radical individuality derived by Rathje, it can also be assumed that the object of identification need not be identical between the individuals of a community. And this is where the challenge lies for university management which, on the one hand, needs to offer appropriate identification objects; on the other hand, the exploration of potential cohesion objects in the university context should be the subject of further research.<sup>2</sup>

Another continuation with regard to Rathje's observations is the assumption that dynamics in the university context are not predominantly and primarily top down, but are influenced to a great extent by members of the university at all levels and in all areas, including their committees. It should therefore be investigated whether, and how, cultural dynamics are formed on the basis of communicative processes that enable cohesion to arise for the context of the specific process.

The failure of change processes, which can be seen again and again in reality, can also be illustrated by the model. After all, it does not assume any normative target achievement processes, but allows a form of self-organisation, which continues to characterise universities in Germany. In addition, the model will show, using the specific explored dynamics, in which form targets are achieved in the university, which continues to act in a participative manner, what reactions are created to the consensus behaviour, despite a simultaneously strengthened university management, and how cultural transformation processes are dealt with in the context of economic competition.

Clark argues that the more fragmentation increases, "system[s] are less held together by integrative ideology" (Clark 1980:24). Hence, universities as complex organisations can hardly be held together by a superordinate idea. As early as at the beginning of the 1980s, he speaks of "new ideas" which "are broader in scope and inherently diffuse" (ibid.:25), arguing that there will no longer be one integrated university culture, but rather a "culture of the conglomeration" and that "the intangible bonds of symbol, emotion, and morality are evermore pluralistic" (ibid.). Anticipating the necessity of a cohesion approach of culture and using the concept of ideologic bonds, he describes a kind of cohesively operating element.

Silver even denies there is a superordinate university culture: "universities do not now have an organisational culture" (Silver 2003:167). There need not necessarily be a cohesive element at

the university level. It seems to be more appropriate to explore cultural dynamics and specific forms of cohesion at different levels and concerning different topics (e. g. strategic management, quality systems, lectures). The normative character of consensus-oriented university culture then disappears and enables elements to emerge that are situative and yet context adequate.

## 5. Outlook: Application to university practice

The model presented above may provide assistance to university practitioners in two areas:

- by way of a heterogeneous and difference-oriented understanding of culture, practitioners are able to gain a better understanding of the conglomerate *university* from a culture theory perspective, and to deal with it in a more adequate manner;
- the concept of dynamics enables practitioners to build identification and to shape change and target achievement processes involving a culture theory perspective and university-specific processes.

The main further development concerning classic organisational or university culture concepts is the acceptance of the heterogeneous structure and contextual difference and the rejection of a process that unifies this structure and content. After all, the reality of the university context shows that homogeneity processes at the middle and superordinate level are difficult to achieve, if at all (e. g. Silver 2003). Instead, the aim is to use identity forming to achieve strategic change processes despite, and with, structural heterogeneity and contextual difference.

To be able to apply the concept of cultural dynamics in the university practice of strategic change processes, the aim of further research must be to explore concrete dynamics in the context of strategic management. The generality of the model enables it to be transferred easily to other contexts within university man-

agement; however, own dynamics must be explored for each context – owing to the generality and process specifics of culture, as described. To make this manageable in practice, instruments to reveal such dynamics can be developed in further research.

To be able to help shape the social changes currently underway, universities must be able to act as corporate actors despite, and including, their heterogeneity (Meier 2009). The cohesion-oriented culture model, including cultural dynamics, enables university management to have an identification-forming effect, enabling the organisation to act and function as an actor in the change processes taking place.

Moreover, the approach of the cohesive university culture offers new action and problem-solving routines in transformation processes. It rejects the blind adoption and transfer of traditional management methods to the university context (Nickel 2001:176) and instead provides soft tools emerging from within the university. These tools enable universities to help shape those processes actively, despite their complex culture, and to view university culture as a proactive element rather than an impeding factor.

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## Endnotes

1. The reinforcement of hierarchical governance as one mechanism of NPM goes hand in hand with the loss of power by governance bodies (Lange / Schimank 2007:524ff.). In the long term, the status group-decisioned university is likely to diminish. Nonetheless, new bodies with integrative forms of communicative structures are currently developing.
2. The exploration of cultural dynamics and cohesion objects in strategic processes at universities is the subject of the author's doctoral thesis, to be completed in autumn 2012.