

Path Dependence in the Personnel Development Policies of German Universities: the Consequences for Professional Capabilities of Academics

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The paper provides theoretical insights into the problem of personnel development policy evaluation. The path dependence assumption applied for the organization level analysis and the capability approach - to the analysis of individual agency, - can be a fruitful perspective in the research of changing university.

The major questions to be addressed are whether the existing policies can be characterized as path dependant and whether they result into the capability extension or capability deprivation of academics.

The tradition of professionalism and related professional culture as an institutional heritage embodied in the university organization culture can be a factor of the emergence of self-reinforcing patterns in policies. The inputs and outputs analysis of policies allow drawing a conclusion about the role of professional socialization in the reproduction of patterned action by professionals.

The research on the path dependence in personnel development policies with relation to the capability analysis can highlight further characteristics of organization change. The first alternative can be the reproduction of professional closure and elitism with the shrinking core and extending periphery of professionals, the growing differentiation of teaching and research functions. The second alternative, referring to the values of capability development, a more inclusive model with greater flexibility, that is mobility and dialog between research and teaching.

Current economic and social developments resulted, on the one hand, into the higher education massification (growing number of bachelor students) and the diversification of universities (in terms of students, education programs, degrees). On the other hand, universities are expected to become the locus of innovation processes, its responsibilities are therefore the production and communication of knowledge and innovations.

Disintegration and diversity following from the various changes in higher education can be defined as the process of the “postmodern university” formation, characterised by diversity, disagreement and difference - both between and within institutions. Values and institutions are “freed from the fixities, or givens of tradition” and instead become constructed and “frequently reconstructed” (Smith and Webster 1997).

The emerging “multiplicity of differences” can be seen in the situation when: “different academics pursuing different knowledges, different teams of researchers combining and recombining to investigate shifting topics, different sorts of students following different courses, with different modes of study and different concerns about themselves, different employment

arrangements of different types of staff – “difference everywhere in this the postmodern, flexible, accommodating university” (Smith and Webster 1997, P. 406).

Some further characteristics of the postmodern university can be identified in the changing identities of place, time, scholarly community and the student community (D. Bridges and T. McLaughlin 2007).

In relation to German universities the question of interest is how far this differentiation will go?

Traditionally German universities were seen as embodiments of the Humboldt principles and presented rather elite institutions. The high professional autonomy degree of academics (professors) allowed coordination solely by professional community. Professional socialization and development were rather the matter of learning by doing, intrinsic mechanisms, than targeted action.

Currently the situation in Germany can be characterized by discrepancies on various levels. The introduction of the bachelor degree enabled greater access to higher education and resulted into increasing number of students.

The growing demand on teaching was followed by changes in personnel policies of universities: in the year 2007 the Junior Professor was introduced with specialization in either research or teaching. Besides that, regional differences in the job titles and the job specifications of professors can be observed (Professuren ohne Zeitliche Begrenzung with specialization Teaching (or Research), various categories of middle-level personnel in teaching and research with “Lehrdeputat” (teaching obligation (measured in academic hours per week)). The changing organizational settings at the German universities demand the new personnel policies (including those which address the university teaching) and quality ensuring mechanisms (Braun D., 2001; Kunzel R., 2005; Teichler U., 2005; Wilkesmann U., Wurmseer G., 2008). The development policies incorporate various levels: individual, professional community, organizational, societal.

The differentiation may result into the situation, when research and education as the major functions of the university get separated. The organizational entities specialized either at research or at education services can emerge. There is a possibility, that the functions of teaching and research will be performed by the different groups of personnel in the postmodern university.

At the same time, market orientation, growing competition and the changing societal role of the universities requires the high standards of services to be ensured. As a result, the problem of balancing the organization change and the processes of personnel development becomes especially acute.

The current academic debate on professionalism is characterized by the coexistence of various approaches, which are being challenged by the ongoing transformation processes of professions and occupations. As Evetts points to, “the meaning of professionalism is not fixed... and sociological analysis of the concept has demonstrated changes over time both in its interpretation and function” (Evetts 2003, p. 395).

Professionalism can be defined as “a set of institutions which permit the members of an occupation to make a living while controlling their own work” (Friedson 2001). Although knowledge and skills make the core of professionalism (knowledge is defined as esoteric because it is specialized and takes time and effort to acquire it), the current transformations of professions question their ability to control the major aspects of their professional practice.

Still being an effective social mobility mechanism (Abbott, 1991), professionalism dominated by organizations and market may change dramatically. Recent trends known as commodification, de-professionalization, re-professionalization, bureaucratization of professions indicate the changing character of professionalism itself.

Organizations demand highly flexible, sufficient and self-managing specialists with unique expertise. Flexibilization and individualization of labour force are diagnosed in the changing career strategies and employment modes.

Besides the classical type of a professional, characterized by an orientation on credentials and common standards of professional practice, involvement into professional associations, clearly defined specialization and the orientation on the professional ethics formulated on the professional group level, the value of service, the new type of a professional emerges. The latter can be characterized by orientations on practical experience rather than academic credentials, flexible specializations and employment strategies, changing qualification and the development of “supportive” qualifications (related to self-marketization and market flexibility), orientation on the extensive network of social contacts rather than professional bodies and locally defined standards of service (including quality standards and professional ethics).

The recent studies of professions demonstrate that the character of involvement both into professional associations and professional organizations is under change (new flexible employment regimes, such as contractual relationship or team-work; the adjustment of the professional associations procedures and competences to the demands of corporations (professional organizations) – such as the redefinition of the associations competences and the profession boundaries (in case of accountants) (Kühl S., 2008; Scott R., 2004; Suddaby R., 2006).

Although academics have traditionally been a major concern of the sociology of professions, university teaching as a specific professionalized practice has been out of the research scope. Parsons considered academics and the link of professional practice to the universities as the main element of professionalism.

Oevermann identifies academic professionals as the group of “professioneller Wissenschaftler”, who handle the crisis situations of the future humanity. The society as a whole is seen as a client of this professional group.

The main characteristic of the professional practice is the unity of research and teaching, where the research provides the dominant logic of practice. Teaching is seen more as an additional duty which enables professionalization of the novelties in the profession.

Other scholars, for example Friedson, see the university teaching as traditionally the “host occupation” (host occupations provide the living for “parasiting” occupations) for most scholars in the humanities (Friedson 2001).

These understandings do not take into account, that university teaching has a major societal role and has developed into an educational profession.

It can be agreed, that in the continental European tradition, “most educational professions legitimize their intervention inference into human lives by referring to the quest to enable each individual to realize his or her full human potential, and, in doing so, well-being, human dignity, agency and self-determination are typical values which educational approaches in the field of welfare share with the capabilities perspective” (Andersen S, Otto H.-U., Ziegler H., p. 169).

The massification of higher education, differentiation of the contractual relations within the university, the practices of modularizing the curriculum and growing interdisciplinarity of research have eroded the link between research and teaching. For many teaching academics, especially in professional fields, their “practical experience rather than their research and scholarship is the resource which they are seen as bringing to their students” (Roodhouse , Mould, Vorley, 2009, P. 142).

The professional fields of practice are becoming blurred as the result of growing interdisciplinarity and the internationalization of the professional community.

There are two major consequences of these processes. Firstly, the lowering quality of teaching with the growing number of students resulting from massification of education (Schimank 2005, P. 154). Secondly, the new demands on teaching emerge, such as the orientation on the production of “hoch qualifizierte Arbeitskräfte für die vrschiedenen gesellschaftlichen Teilsysteme” instead of “growing up” a scientist (“the future professor”) (Schimank 2005, P. 155).

Thus, the postmodern university demands such a type of a university teacher, who will be professionalized instead of practicing teaching by chance. Here it is possible to speak about the

demand on the “institutional” professionalism – the practice based on the combination of skills, knowledges and moral orientations which should be developed not by chance, but within the specialized institutional settings of a higher education system, particularly, in the university.

The situation in Germany has been traditionally characterized by a high level of state regulation and professional control in form of the dominance of “academic oligarchies” (Schimank 2001, p. 148). At the same time, the higher education system is undergoing change characterized by the shift for higher accountability and marketization processes. Recent studies indicate the decline of professional power in the university settings (U. Schimank 2005).

The universities offer various opportunities for professional development of their teaching staff. For example, the “Start in der Lehre” program at the University of Dortmund, PEP professional development program at the University of Bielefeld, or general Qualifizierungsprogramm für Lehrende at the Universities of Bremen, Oldenburg and Osnabrück. The question is what kind of impact will have these differentiated, rather unsystematic and local initiatives on the professional practices of academics?

As soon as professional power is being challenged by market logic and managerialism, the new intervention and coordination policies should be implemented.

These policies are at risk of latent inefficiency, which “becomes manifest when an organization confronted with these change requirements cannot adopt new measures because it is confined to the existing path of action, which binds it to the historical solutions” (Sydow, Schreyögg, Koch, 2009: P. 695).

This may result into the emergence of strong barriers to change and losses.

The recent research on personnel policies (with the specific focus of job descriptions in job announcements) carried out by the Institut Fuer Hochschulforschung Wittenberg revealed reproduction of discourses and practices confronting the new organizational developments (for example, teaching is not mentioned among the duties of the prospective professors) (Burkhardt, 2010).

The quality-perspective should not be bounded solely to the measurable policy outcomes (statistics on diversity etc.) on the organizational level, but extrapolate to the individual, professional community and society levels.

Capabilities are considered as “the alternative combination of functionings that are feasible for [a person] to achieve”; they are “the substantive freedom” a person has “to lead the kind of life he or she has reason to value” (Sen 1999, P. 87). Thus, a capability is “a person’s ability to do valuable acts or reach valuable states of being” (Sen 1993, p. 30). Capability shows the alternative combinations of things that a person is able to do or to be.

The application of the capability approach to the higher education research has proved its high potential in examining external and internal capabilities. Walker identifies the following professional capabilities and valuable functionings of the public-good professional (that should be developed during the education process at the university) (the capabilities are as follows: informed vision, affiliation (solidarity), resilience, social and collective struggles, emotion, integrity, assurance and confidence, knowledge, imagination, practical skills.

When applying the capabilities approach to the evaluation of institutions (particularly, related to teaching), Boni stresses the importance of the human development values such as: well-being, participation and empowerment, equity and diversity, sustainability (Boni, Perez-Foguet, 2008). The “lists” enable the assessment of the current situation in terms of what is present and what is missing.

The weak point of the “capabilities-lists” is that they do not take into account the processes underlying the capabilities. It is not enough to consider only achieved (equality) outcomes of capabilities. Since the equal capabilities may hide various processes of their development, the (equal) capabilities enabled may not result into equal functionings too: many other constrains such as gender or social class inequalities may have a great impact (even on the level of mental models) (the problem is considered in more detail by Walker, 2009). Therefore,

the significance of the implementation into action should be addressed by the consideration of the socialization process. This will allow overcoming originally highly individualistic perspective of the capabilities approach by linking the capabilities to professional values, social norms and the relations with others.

When analysing the personnel development policies certain assumptions may be made:

- a. The misfit between the development policies and the characteristics of the existing professional socialization processes enhances (or is) the capability deprivation of academics
- b. While the tension between capability enabled and functioning can be the result of the inequality structures on various levels. The unjust structures can be contested (and transformed) in the bottom-up processes (actions of the professionals themselves; as part of the professional socialization).

The capability-approach considers the persons as ends of the development policies, therefore it can be fruitful in the analysis of professional well-being on one hand, and the institutional arrangements on the other. The development of certain capabilities can be addressed as the element of the professional socialization process. In the university, the account of professional capabilities (Walker 2009) and the processes which underlie the situations when capabilities result into particular functionings will allow revealing, *firstly*, the intrinsic mechanisms of professional development;

secondly, the role of the controversial institutional settings (which can be critically evaluated from the capability perspective);

and *thirdly*, the characteristics of the professionalization (formal, non-formal and informal factors, agents) of academics

The policy should be oriented on the *capability extension* and *restructuring of unjust settings*.

As the leading principle can serve the intention to “evaluate freedoms for people to be able to make decisions they value and work to remove obstacles to those freedoms, that is, expand people’s capabilities” (Walker 2009. p.8).

That is why professional socialization can be viewed as the form of social reproduction and social transformation at the same time. The capabilities enhanced, and the resulting functionings, may contribute to the transformation of the unjust institutional settings.

The capabilities make the social conditions and the outcomes of socialization processes. The analysis of the professionalization process makes it possible to understand the (re)production of the unjust structures as the settings which deform choices and aspirations.

The importance of the consideration of the role of the existing power relations (institutional settings) and available resources (opportunities, knowledge, cultural capital, values) in the process of socialization can be stressed (Walker 2009).

The evaluation of the institutional arrangement in the relation to professional socialization will reveal the processes of capability development and deformation.

As it was mentioned before, it is important to take into account the existing inequality structures affecting the capability development and their relation to the particular functionings.

Inequality of contextual conditions affects the peoples’ ability to act. These circumstances are the inequality of chances and abilities to choose. The major role of the society in general and public policies in particular in the formation of such circumstances has been proved.

When evaluating social arrangements against a criterion of justice and considerations of equalities, “it is people’s capabilities that must guide the evaluation rather than how much money, education resources, or qualifications they are able to command” (Amartya Sen’s Capability Approach and Social Justice in Education. Melanie Walker and Elaine Unterhalter. Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. p. 4).

The disadvantaged groups can have limited capabilities, their well-being can be diminished, that means, the capabilities can be deprived as the result of unjust institutional arrangements and policies.

The tension between capability and functioning is the result of the inequality structures on various levels. The situation when the capabilities are enabled but can not be practiced can illustrate that.

That is why it is important to distinguish between capabilities and functionings. The latter are the actual achievements and outcome (despite capabilities, which are merely opportunities to achieve, "potentials").

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