Towards a unified but stratified university sector?

On the effects of the German Excellence Initiative

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This paper aims to account for the effects of the German Excellence Initiative. As a ‘policy of excellence’, this competitive device for the distribution of government funds induces vertical differentiations into a formerly unified university sector for which a “fictitious equality” (Kreckel 2010, p. 24) between universities of the same type had been assumed. Taking the funding of graduate schools as empirical example, I will show how the Excellence Initiative legitimized the introduction of a new model of doctoral education and how it was related to a successive boom of doctoral program across the system. Based on longitudinal data, I will employ a neo-institutionalist perspective to explain the expansion of doctoral programs in Germany. In particular, I will ask whether this development is the outcome of isomorphic change in the German higher education system and how it is connected to new vertical differentiations.

Legitimizing graduate schools as a new model of doctoral education

Until the early 2000s, there was no specific sector of doctoral education in Germany. The only relevant regulation was derived from the binary structure of the German higher education system, which defines doctoral education as a prerogative of the universities. However, doctoral education is only loosely coupled to the university. In contrast to Anglo-Saxon higher education systems, it is not conceptualized as the third cycle of studies but as the first stage of professional academic practice (Kreckel 2016). Doctoral researchers are not enrolled in specific schools. The majority of them are employed as research associates. They are recruited by professors and not the department or the university. Research associates take on tasks in research, teaching, and administration. Alongside these organizational tasks, they work on their dissertation (Bloch and Würmann 2012). There is no formal curriculum. Instead, doctoral education is envisioned as a socialization process based on a master-apprentice model between supervisor and doctoral researcher that is shaped by informal learning processes, expectations, and sanctions (Engler 2001; Enders 1994; Oevermann 2005).

This situation changed in 2005, when the Excellence Initiative, a competitive device for the distribution of government funds over a period of five years, prompted the universities to apply for graduate schools in one of the program’s three funding lines. The framework of the Excellence Initiative and its official selection criteria has two performative effects on doctoral education. First, it addresses the universities as organizational actors, capable of strategic action and accountable for the effects of their actions (Krücken and Meier 2006; cf. Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson 2000; Ramirez 2010). Graduate schools are conceptualized as university² programs for the education of excellent junior researchers. They are expected to be part of a university’s profile (German Research Foundation and German Council of Science and Humanities 2010). Different from the traditional model of doctoral education, graduate schools include a curriculum, supervision agreements and formal admission procedures, as well as measures to increase gender equality and internationality.

¹ This paper is based on research conducted within the Research Unit “Mechanisms of elite formation in the German educational system”, sub-project “Elite formation and universities”, funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG). Parts of it are taken from Bloch (2017).

² Universities of applied sciences and private universities are excluded from the Excellence Initiative.
Universities thus have to transform the old master-apprentice model into an organizational program with formal rules.

Second, the Excellence Initiative induces stratification in the field of higher education. The competitive and formalized process of the Excellence Initiative leads to a clear assignment of status. A group of graduate schools is selected and officially declared to be excellent. Only these graduate schools are funded. This unequal distribution of resources marks the Excellence Initiative out as a “policy of excellence” that assigns universities and their graduate schools “an apical status and position within the higher education system” (Rostan and Vaira 2011, p. 57). Graduate Schools of Excellence, as they are officially called, are thus a resource used for positioning a university; they “are one method of a faculty or a university to create ‘critical masses’ of research capacity” (Schimank and Lange 2009, p. 71). In this they differ from their predecessors, the Research Training Groups (RTG; Graduiertenkollegs) funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG). Despite being a “support program for outstanding research and an elite of doctoral researchers” (German Research Foundation 2000, p. 8), the prestige of the RTGs was tied to the selection procedure of an intra-academic institution for the competitive distribution of research funds and bestowed mainly on the successful applicants. These were groups of professors and not universities. Lacking an institutionalized status, RTGs are inherently temporary in their design, while Graduate Schools of Excellence are expected to persist beyond the frame of the Excellence Initiative.

The boom of doctoral programs as an effect of the Excellence Initiative?

After the Excellence Initiative had been launched, doctoral programs in German higher education boomed. Several other research associations, such as the Leibniz Association and the Max-Planck Society, started to implement their own doctoral programs, but the greatest expansion was seen in single universities or faculties: the number of doctoral programs without support from the Excellence Initiative, the German Research Foundation, or research associations increased from 91 (2006) to 516 (2014) (see Figure 1).
The boom in doctoral programs points to isomorphic change in the German university sector. Within the space of a few years, the overwhelming majority of doctoral-granting public universities (78 out of 88) set up at least one doctoral program on their own. Because this boom followed the funding of graduate schools through the Excellence Initiative, it can be related to both coercive and mimetic isomorphism in the field (DiMaggio and Powell 1983, p. 150f.). Public universities are to a large extent dependent on a single source of support, namely the state. Although the state has refrained from making doctoral programs obligatory within the university sector by law, access to the Excellence Initiative’s considerable resources depends to a large extent on having a graduate school. Within the framework of the Excellence Initiative universities need at least one graduate school (and research cluster) to be eligible for the most prestigious of its funding lines, “institutional strategies,” which assigns excellence status to the whole university (ExV 2005).

As graduate schools were still being funded in the second round of the Excellence Initiative, universities can also be expected to copy the strategies of their successful counterparts. From this perspective, Graduate Schools of Excellence act as promoters of stratification and simultaneously generate the very field of doctoral education in which they take the top position. This dynamic meets political expectations “to initiate a performance spiral [Leistungsspirale] with the goal of establishing top positions as well as an increase in quality across Germany as a site for universities and science” (ExV 2005, Preamble). Although graduate schools will no longer be funded directly in the next round

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3 Based on a survey of all doctoral programs in 2014 at the 88 public research universities that are eligible to participate in the Excellence Initiative. The survey included the founding year of each doctoral program; however, those programs that had ceased to exist in the meantime could not be accounted for.

4 Of the ten universities that had at the time of writing not introduced a doctoral program, five are monodisciplinary universities for teacher education or public administration.
of the Excellence Initiative, it has become a prerequisite for universities to have a graduate school if they want to be competitive in attracting public resources across different funding schemes.\(^5\)

There is, however, a third source of isomorphic change to which the boom in doctoral programs can also be related. Normative pressures to ensure the quality of the PhD have been mounting in Germany, especially after some highly publicized cases of plagiarism at doctoral level, involving the minister of foreign affairs (Guttenberg) and education and research (Schavan), who as a consequence had to resign from office. Both the German Rectors’ Conference (HRK, 2012) and the German Council of Science and Humanities (WR, 2011) have recommended the general implementation of doctoral programs as a means of quality assurance. The establishment of doctoral programs is further promoted by the Bologna process, which aims at institutionalizing doctoral education as the third cycle of a European study system (Hornbostel 2009). Having a doctoral program has become proof that universities assume responsibility for the quality of their doctoral education.

The boom in doctoral programs, then, points to two dynamics in the newly emerging field of doctoral education: (1) a stratificatory dynamic driven by doctoral programs as a means of vertical differentiation and (2) a horizontal dynamic driven by alignment with a general model of doctoral education (cf. Bleiklie 2011, p. 21). The two dynamics are mutually reinforcing: although the Bologna process had already started in 1999, only a few doctoral programs had been established in Germany by 2006. In the absence of other normative pressures to transform doctoral education, the Excellence Initiative legitimized doctoral programs as a means of stratification. It sparked 262 proposals to establish a graduate school.\(^6\) Apparently, many proposals have been realized anyway, regardless of their success in the Excellence Initiative. These doctoral programs may be related to positioning a university in future competitions, but they – and other newcomers – are also legitimized by the Bologna process, which promotes the general implementation of doctoral programs across the system. Thus, many of the newly established doctoral programs are not intended to be competitive, nor do they have the necessary funding. For instance, almost a fifth (95 of 516 in 2014) of all programs run by single universities are service-oriented programs that structure the PhD phase only formally and only offer extra, not directly PhD-related, courses. The movement of these programs is not vertically-aspiring but horizontally aligning.

**Effects of the Excellence Initiative beyond the university sector**

This horizontal movement also impacts, however, on the binary structure of the German higher education system, and therefore on an established stratification between different sectors. The European degree structure differentiates between academic levels but not between types of higher education institutions. As a consequence, differences in the degree structure between universities and universities of applied sciences (Fachhochschulen) have vanished, which has led to a “blurring of boundaries” (Witte et al. 2008) between the two sectors. This is only the latest development in a

\(^5\) For instance, the latest federal competitive funding scheme, the Pact for Junior Researchers (Pakt für den wissenschaftlichen Nachwuchs), requires the universities to have a personnel development concept in place for acquiring additional professorships. Graduate schools are one cornerstone of such concepts. In a similar fashion, research clusters funded by the Excellence Initiative and Collaborative Research Centers (Sonderforschungsbereiche) funded by the German Research Foundation have set up their own doctoral programs.

\(^6\) Number of draft proposals (Antragsskizzen) for the first phase in 2005/06. Universities submitted another 98 draft proposals in 2011 for the second phase (German Research Foundation and German Council of Science and Humanities 2015, p. 13).
longer process of “academic drift” (Neave 1979) that has led universities of applied sciences to more and more resemble universities. Still, the universities retain the privilege of granting doctoral degrees. It is legitimized through their higher research quality and capacities, as universities of applied sciences are still considered primarily teaching-oriented institutions and their professors have a considerably higher teaching load. Without the right to grant doctoral degrees, they also lack positions for doctoral researchers. The privilege of the universities has, however, become a contested political issue. Universities of applied sciences demand the right to grant doctoral degrees at least for those faculties that have an established academic record. Lately, the government of Hesse has granted them this partial right. They establish doctoral programs to prove the quality of their doctoral education and to legitimize themselves as doctoral-granting institutions. Already, 26 of the 516 doctoral programs beyond the Excellence Initiative are run in cooperation between universities and universities of applied sciences.

Nevertheless, this “de-diversification” (Teichler 2008, p. 367) triggered by the Bologna process has not led to a leveling of all differences “but rather towards processes of reassembling and restructuring” (Rostan and Vaira 2011, p. 68). Isomorphic change does lead to institutional resemblance, but it also brings with it new differentiations and can thus be related to stratification. If higher education institutions perceive themselves to be similar, and common concepts diffuse into the field (Strang and Meyer 1994, p. 103), then they also open up a space in which they can be compared with each other (Bloch and Mitterle 2017). Furthermore, if competition in this comparative space leads to a general “leveling upward” (Trow 1984, p. 144) of higher education institutions, this may run counter the state’s interest in institutional diversity. As a result, the state may react with policies of “leveling downward, toward the development of a large comprehensive unitary system marked by the characteristics of mass higher education, with certain small and selective elite ‘centers of excellence’” (ibid.).

If the “leveling upward” of universities of applied sciences means that they are subject to the same requirements as universities, namely to set up doctoral programs in order to assure the quality of doctoral education, then the “blurring of boundaries” between the two sectors will continue and new vertical differentiations may come to replace the old binary structure (cf. Bleiklie 2011, p. 31): between universities of applied sciences or some of their faculties with the right to grant doctoral degrees and those without; and between universities with excellent graduate schools and those without. The latter universities then hardly differ from doctoral-granting universities of applied sciences. A new field of doctoral education thus emerges. At the bottom, universities of applied sciences are no longer excluded and some⁷ move into the field, while at the same time “centers of excellence” are demarcated at the top.⁸

Beyond their shared characteristic as university programs, different types of doctoral programs are connected with different aspirations and relate to different comparative spaces. Based on the survey

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⁷ As devices like the Excellence Initiative focus on research, teaching-oriented institutions may regard them as “irrelevant to the activities in which the institution is engaged” (Bleiklie 2011, p. 31) and will thus refrain from such aspirations.

⁸ Both the Excellence Initiative and the funding ranking by the German Research Foundation reflect a tripartition of the German university sector, with 10 to 15 universities with an excellent in record in all research areas at the top, followed by another 30 to 40 universities that are excellent in some areas and have been partially successful in the Excellence Initiative (by gaining a graduate school and/or a research cluster). The remaining universities are not competitive within the Excellence Initiative and are also at the bottom of the DFG funding ranking (Kreckel 2015, p. 407; cf. Hornbostel and Möller 2015, p. 52).
of all doctoral programs (N=516), four different types can be distinguished: (1) interdisciplinary programs in which disciplines from at least two different subject groups (e.g. humanities and natural sciences) participate (19 percent, N=97); (2) disciplinary programs that are confined to one discipline, often named in the title of the program (e.g. “graduate school of social sciences,” 37 percent, N=193); topic-centered programs that are related to a specific research topic in the tradition of the DFG RTGs and are often temporary (25 percent, N=131); service-oriented programs that structure the PhD formally (19 percent, N=95). Interdisciplinary programs relate to competitive devices such as the Excellence Initiative that take interdisciplinarity as one official criterion of excellence (German Research Foundation and German Council of Science and Humanities 2010). Disciplinary programs relate to the academic profession, as they educate doctoral researchers for a specific research area. Topic-centered programs relate to specific research discourses in the scientific community, as they bring together senior as well as junior researchers for a temporary research alliance. Service-oriented programs relate to the university as an organization, as they aim to incorporate all doctoral researchers of a university or a faculty into formal structures.

Isomorphic change thus leads to a general alignment with one model of doctoral education while simultaneously advancing the emergence of new vertical differentiations that are connected with different types of doctoral programs.

**Conclusion: Towards a unified but stratified university sector**

By reconstructing the emergence of a new field of doctoral education, I have shown how the introduction of rank differences by the Excellence Initiative is related to a successive boom in doctoral programs. From a neo-institutionalist perspective, this boom appears as the outcome of isomorphic change in German higher education. However, the question of change is also a matter of debate in neo-institutional theory. Greenwood et al. (2002, p. 60), for example, propose different “stages of institutional change” that eventually culminate in the diffusion and reinstitutionalization of new concepts. Such a model of different stages is useful in accounting for early adopters, taking the Graduate Schools of Excellence as promoters of stratification. Yet it has been criticized for limiting the actors’ responses at later stages of change to “mindless imitation fueled by anxiety-driven pressures to conform” (Lounsbury 2008, p. 350). As I have shown, the rapid expansion of doctoral programs in Germany is not driven by imitation alone but also by new vertical differentiations in the university sector and beyond.

One key factor affecting the diffusion of concepts is the “perceived similarity” of the actors: “perceptions of similarity provide a rationale for diffusion. They make it sensible for an actor to use another’s choices and the consequences of those choices as a guide” (Strang and Meyer 1994, p. 103). In the case of German doctoral education, we can see two different sets of actors acting on the basis of their “perceived similarity”: first, universities that aspire to a top position in the Excellence Initiative seek to satisfy its official criteria of excellence. Although graduate schools will no longer be funded through the Excellence Initiative, they have become a cornerstone of universities’ excellence strategies and may well serve stratificatory purposes in other comparative spaces in the future. Second, universities of applied sciences set up doctoral programs to prove their quality and thus as a means of substantiating their claim to be not only similar but also equal to universities. “Perceived similarity” thus relates to different segments of German higher education, depending on institutional type or position in either higher education sector. Isomorphism depends on who perceives whom as similar and along which lines. The general model of doctoral education as a program is adopted, but
it serves different purposes. A new field of doctoral education has emerged, populated with doctoral programs that are driven by isomorphic change but cutting across different higher education sectors and generating new vertical differentiations.

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