Lorenz Mrohs[1]

Projects as Agile Innovation Spaces? (Un-)Intended Effects in HE Development

Abstract

In higher education institutions (HEIs), projects are becoming increasingly recognised as agile innovation spaces that facilitate innovation and implement structural change. However, little is known about how innovation-related projects affect structural transformation. This study analyses 20 qualitative interviews with coordinators of digitalization-related HE development projects. The findings indicate that both intended effects and unintended challenges influence the institutionalisation of innovations. Despite these tensions, projects function as agile structures and can serve as pivotal steering instruments in HE development and its academic governance.

Keywords

projects, agile innovation, academic governance, higher education management, higher education development

1 Corresponding Author; Universität Bamberg; lorenz.mrohs@uni-bamberg.de; ORCiD 0000-0003-4866-9734

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Projekte als agiler Innovationsraum? (Un-)Intendierte Wirkungen hochschulischer Lehrentwicklungsprojekte

Zusammenfassung

Projekte gelten auch an Hochschulen als agiler Innovationsraum, um Innovationen und (Struktur-)Veränderungen herbeizuführen. Allerdings fehlen Einblicke zu den Wirkungen innovationsbezogener Forschungs- und Entwicklungsprojekte. Für die vorliegende qualitative Studie wurden 20 Projektkoordinator:innen mittels Leitfadeninterviews befragt und die Ergebnisse anschließend ausgewertet. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass sowohl intendierte Wirkungen als auch unintendierte Herausforderungen die Verstetigung von Innovationen beeinflussen. Sie zeigen, dass Projekte trotz vieler Herausforderungen als agile Innovationsräume betrachtet werden können und damit ein wichtiges Steuerungselement der Hochschulentwicklung darstellen.

Schlüsselwörter

Projekte, Agilität, Innovationen, Hochschulforschung, Hochschulentwicklung

1 Introduction

In higher education institutions (HEIs), (externally funded) projects have become standard in the organisation of research (Besio, 2009; Torka, 2009) and HE development (Lehmkuhl, 2018; Schmidt, 2017; Seyfeli-Özhizalan et al., 2022). In HE development, projects are increasingly considered as an agile development space for innovations and academic governance. As a temporary organisational form (Bakker et al., 2016; Sydow et al., 2004), projects have the potential to circumvent the inflexible frameworks of organisations. They facilitate the experimental introduction of innovations and modifications within the confines of temporary structures for a predetermined period (Bakker, 2010; Lundin & Söderholm, 1995). The growing reliance on projects reflects broader transformations in the governance of HEIs. As digitalisation has become a key structural condition of action (Stalder, 2018), HEIs are under increasing pressure from external sources to modernise teaching and organisational processes (Mrohs, 2024). While numerous studies have documented teaching innovations and digital tools, little is known about the organisational effects of development projects and the challenges of sustaining their results.

This article addresses this gap by analysing how project coordinators in HEIs assess the effects of their initiatives and their prospects for institutionalisation. It explores how coordinators of digitalisation-related HE development projects perceive the effects of their initiatives. Based on qualitative interviews with 20 project coordinators across German HEIs, this study provides new insights into the tensions between innovation and inertia in HE development. It shows how projects can foster change but also generate structural frictions that challenge their institutionalisation. The results are framed by the concept of HEIs as specific organisations (Musselin, 2007; Weick, 1976). They are further contextualised in terms of the article's guiding question: to what extent can projects be understood as agile innovation spaces?

The article is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews the relevant literature; Section 3 outlines the methodology; Section 4 presents the findings; and Section 5 discusses and contextualises these findings, offering concluding remarks.

2 Literature Review

Research on innovations in HE teaching is wide-ranging, covering early studies on e-competence development (Grote & Dietz, 2008), while more recent work examined HEIs responses to the COVID-19 pandemic (Bils & Pellert, 2021; Deimann, 2021; Hafer et al., 2021). In addition, several studies have adressed teaching strategies (Hobuß et al., 2023) and the implementation of digital innovations at individual HEIs (Kauffeld et al., 2019; Mägdefrau et al., 2017). Numerous teaching concepts have been developed, including virtual reality, teaching-learning labs and digital tools (Hombach & Rundnagel, 2023; Kauffeld & Othmer, 2019; Mrohs et al., 2023, 2025).

The growing number of projects reflects a shift in how innovation is organised within HEIs. Digitalisation acts not simply as innovation, but as a driver for new infrastructures and governance modes. Benz-Gydat et al. (2021) identified key success factors such as personal commitment, organisational connectivity, and support structures for such projects. Daniel et al. (2025) conceptualised implementation as a multi-level process shaped by usability, institutional backing and legal feasibility. They stress the difficulty of sustaining innovation beyond the funding period. Furthermore, Schmidt (2017) examined the role of teaching projects for HE governance and emphasised that their project-based format allows for flexible experimentation and strategic coordination, particularly in structural development contexts.

While projects offer important opportunities for innovation, they also face significant implementation challenges. Graf-Schlattmann et al. (2021b) identified common obstacles and key factors, including collective willingness to change (Graf-Schlattmann et al., 2020) and a strategically framed digitalisation process (Graf-Schlattmann et al., 2021a). In addition, Seyfeli-Özhizalan et al. (2022) explored the structural consequences of development projects: Their findings indicate that such projects can impact internal processes, actor roles, and institutional structures, often in complex and unintended ways.

While existing studies explore implementation and structural effects of HE innovation projects, little is known about how project members themselves perceive the outcome of projects and its effects. This article adresses this gap and explores the (un)intended effects and challenges of innovative HE development projects as reported by project stakeholders.

3 Methodology

This qualitative study focuses on third-party funded research and development projects situated at the intersection of digitalisation and HE teaching. The sample was delineated based on the broader societal relevance of digital transformation and the specific challenges it poses for HEIs.

In spring 2024, a total of 109 projects from four funding programs were identified as situated within this intersection. Multi-institutional project consortia were excluded from the study, as their governance structures and coordination mechanisms differ substantially from those of single-institution projects. The empirical study employed a qualitative research design and focused on interviewing involved project coordinators. They were selected as interviewees due to their pivotal role in project implementation and internal governance (Kretschmer & Bischoff, 2017), making them key actors in the success of innovation processes (Wolff et al., 2025).

A systematic online search identified 54 project coordinators. All were contacted via email, and 20 interviews were conducted based on the responses received until empirical saturation was reached. The interviewees represented eleven universities and nine universities of applied sciences. The data was collected through semi-structured qualitative interviews (Mayring, 2023), using narrative prompts to stimulate reflective accounts (Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2021). Each interview began with an open question about the general tasks involved in project coordination. Follow-up questions covered project structure, internal collaboration, challenges, key decision-making processes, expectations, and the intended and unintended effects of the projects.

The interviews were conducted on Zoom, with an average duration of 56 minutes. They were recorded, transcribed verbatim using AI-supported software (f4x), and analysed using qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2023) with MAXQDA software. An inductively derived coding system was developed to access to the interviewees' explicit knowledge. The code book that resulted from this process captured a variety of themes that emerged from the data. The present paper focuses on the primary category of project effects, which comprises three subsidiary categories derived from the interview material.

4 Findings of the Interview Study

The presented results focus on the topic of perceived project effects, showing not only the *intended effects* (Section 3.1), but also *unintended outcomes* (Section 3.2). At the same time, a range of *challenges* (Section 3.3) emerged which have significant impact on the institutionalisation of project outcomes within the HEIs.

4.1 Intended Effects of the Projects

The HE development projects examined primarily aimed to advance the digital transformation of HE teaching. The core objective was to implement the innovations outlined in the project objectives and ensure their institutionalisation beyond the project's funding period. The intended effects of the projects are captured in the category *"Intended Effects"*, which is further differentiated into several sub-categories (Figure 1).

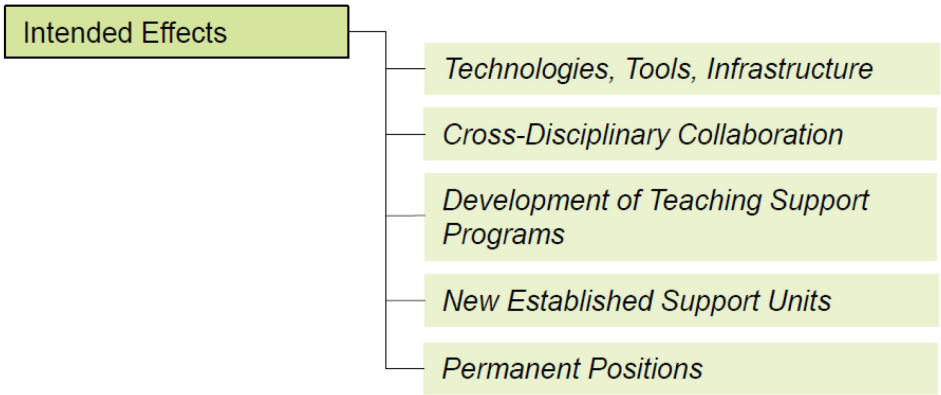

Figure 1: Subcategories of the category “Intended Effects” (own illustration)

These intended effects were derived directly from the project goals and aimed at fostering changes in HE teaching practices. According to the project coordinators, these changes were most often observed at the decentralised level, particularly within individual faculties and departments. Here, the introduction of *new technologies, tools, and digital infrastructures* was seen as a means of addressing and innovating discipline-specific teaching needs:

> “We also did various things in terms of infrastructure with the project funds, that we simply purchased various items for lecture recordings and hybrid teaching. Of course, that remains there” (Interview8, Pos. 113).

This process was frequently accompanied by *cross-disciplinary collaboration*:

> “What is also increasing over the course of the project, which is great, is that interdisciplinary expertise is being actively sought across teams. For example, the lab where qualitative research is taught […] is now being approached by the interdisciplinary companion research, and then there is an exchange. The colleague himself also occasionally collaborates with the lab and explores how it might be used somehow” (Interview6, Pos. 116).

This collaboration can be attributed to the often interdisciplinary nature of the project work and is expected to continue beyond the project period. These collaborative structures are further supported by the expansion and *development of teaching support programs*, typically housed within third space service units that were involved in the projects:

> "We have created handouts, which will eventually be available to everyone on our website. The aim is to preserve the experiences we have gained. [We] are currently working on a concept for how the whole thing can be designed in a sustainable way" (Interview7, Pos. 96).

From the perspective of the interviewed coordinators, these enhanced service structures offer realistic prospects for institutionalisation, particularly when they are backed by *newly established units* or *permanent positions* within the third space: „For example, we have now set up a service center for digital learning formats, which basically emerged from the project" (Interview2, Pos. 8) and „this part-time position will then be increased to a full-time position (Interview5, Pos. 153). Such developments are seen as essential to ensuring long-term institutional support for the innovations generated by the projects.

The findings suggest that decentralised changes at the departmental level are most frequently perceived as intended outcomes of the teaching-related projects. These are often supported through enhanced didactic support structures and interdisciplinary collaboration.

4.2 Unintended Effects of the Projects

Over the course of implementation, projects often trigger developments that go beyond their inital scope. These effects are captured in the category of *Unintended Effects* (Figure 2), which were neither part of the original project goals nor intended in this specific form.

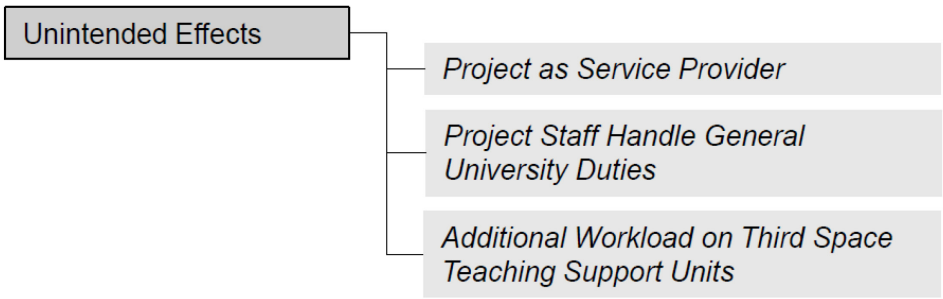

Figure 2: Subcategories of the category “Unintended Effects” (own illustration)

The interviewed coordinators report that their projects are often seen as pioneers of teaching innovation. Their teams are often regarded as primary sources of assistance for digitalisation-related inquiries. Consequently, they unintentionally assume the role of institutional *service providers*. In many cases, this leads them to take on permanent responsibilities that should ideally be provided by the HEIs itself, but which are often passed on to the projects due to a lack of resources. This situation is especially apparent when university leadership delegates all matters relating to digitalisation and teaching to the projects. Alternatively, project teams may be assigned with hosting, supporting, and training users for university-wide digital applications. One project coordinator critically reflects on this development, stating:

> “Strictly speaking, it’s a misuse of project funds. […] And I understand why universities do this in order to make progress, because the internal resources simply aren’t there. But of course it is not really in the spirit of things […] to use project funds for positions that actually need to be permanently established at universities.” (Interview20, Pos. 55)

A similar issue arises when *project staff handle general university duties* that should be part of the administrative structure. These range from preparing for system reaccreditation to familiarising themselves with public procurement law. One coordinator recounts:

> "That meant I had to handle it myself and was required to familiarize myself with procurement regulations […]. That was essentially the core of my work for at least six months" (Interview13, Pos. 6).

The increased demand for support, also results in an *additional workload on third space teaching support units*. Although these units were expanded with additional staff through project funding, the interviewees reported increased pressure on third space structures:

> "At the beginning, there was this expectation that a lot would happen in the support units. And then you realize that the volume of requests is so great that it becomes difficult to meet them […], even with the additional staff that has been financed." (Interview10, Pos. 94)

These findings suggest that projects not only pursue their defined objectives but also need to address unintended effects that arise as a result of their integration into the HE environment.

4.3 Challenges to the Institutionalisation of Project Outcomes

The objective of institutionalising the outcomes is to ensure that the projects innovations are successfully transferred into the broader HEI structures. However, this process is accompanied by a range of challenges, captured in the category *Challenges to Institutionalisation* (Figure 3).

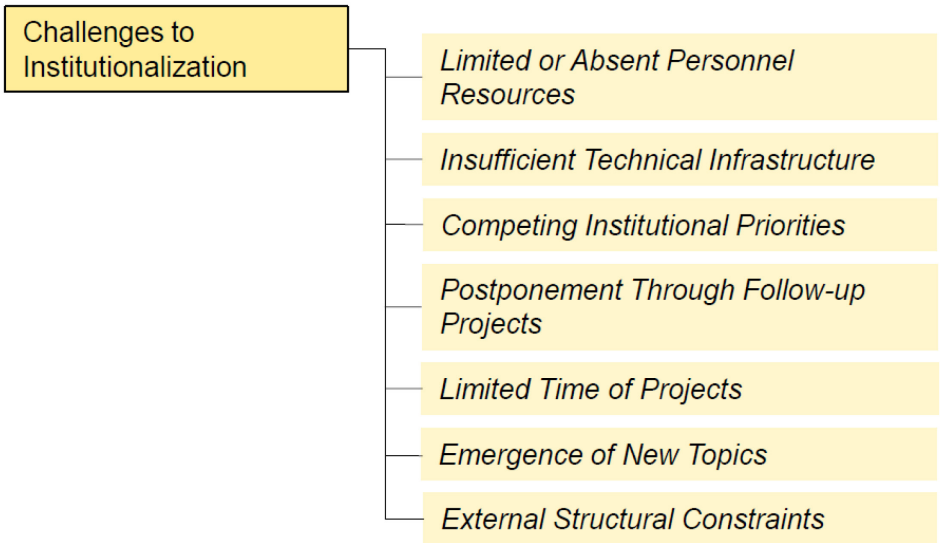

Figure 3: The category “Challenges to Institutionalisation” with its subcategories (own illustration)

A central challenge perceived by the interviewees are *limited or absent personnel resources* in support units, which are expected to take over new tasks from the projects without additional ressources:

> “We have little financial leeway to institutionalise positions. [...] We will try in many places to ensure that […] what was developed, is carried forward […] – but by relying on existing positions at the university.” (Interview6, Pos. 26)

In addition, some HEIs have *insufficient technical infrastructure* required to sustain project-based innovations:

> “What we discovered […] was that the server capacity is simply not sufficient to support a university-wide digital examination system” (Interview9, Pos. 96).

These challenges are not only due to resource constraints but also reflect a lack of strategic support from university leadership. *Competing institutional priorities* – such as research excellence or IT security – often result in lower prioritisation of innovating HE teaching:

> "We had a IT security incident, and […] many of the staff in our IT service center were caught up in dealing with that. [...] In such situations, unfortunately, we don't rank high on the priority list" (Interview11, Pos. 88).

In response to staffing challenges and limited executive support, some HEI attempt to secure the continuation of innovations through follow-up projects funded by additional third-party grants. This practice is captured in the subcategory *postponement through follow-up projects*:

> "To lose that expertise […] all of a sudden – I think that would be a major mistake […]. So, we're now trying to continue things through other third-party projects" (Interview16, Pos. 67).

Another structural challenge is the *limited time of projects*, typically three to five years, which is viewed as insufficient for achieving institutional change:

> "In the beginning, we faced a lot of resistance from colleagues who are deeply rooted in tradition and refused to engage with the tools. [...] We would have liked to achieve more – especially in terms of changing the learning culture" (Interview13, Pos. 22).

Beyond internal factors, external conditions may also impact institutionalisation processes. The rapid pace of digital change has led to the *emergence of new topics* (e.g., AI tools) that were not foreseeable at the project's outset but now demand attention and cause delays. In other cases, external hurdles must also be considered, for example professional laws at universities of applied sciences, which were seen as a hurdle to new teaching opportunities.

5 Projects as Agile Innovation Spaces?

Using the example of research and development projects in the context of the digital transformation of HE teaching, this study suggests that despite various challenges projects act as innovation spaces and a new model for academic governance.

In summary, projects in HE development can fulfill the following functions:

- Projects provide spaces for creative activity, enabling both control and flexibility (Sahlin-Andersson & Söderholm, 2002). This is reflected in decentralised implementation and interdisciplinary collaboration, which were reported as intended effects.
- Projects can coordinate innovation (Besio, 2021) and create the necessary organizational leeway, as seen in the establishment of third-space support structures and mobilisation of otherwise unavailable resources.
- Projects enable the development and implementation of innovation and may have structural effects on HEIs.
- Projects may expose structural deficits in HEIs, such as unsufficient HE structures. These deficits, however, may not always be addressed and can hinder institutionalisation.

The observed effects in the examined projects reflect the concept of HEIs as specific organisations (Huber, 2012) and the logic of loosely coupled systems (Weick, 1976; Musselin, 2007). This concept explains why decentralised developments in particular are considered to have good prospects of becoming established. This is because the weakly integrated connections between faculties, departments, and institutes – coupled with their substantial autonomy in teaching and research – foster localised innovations at the departmental or chair level (Weick, 1976). Here, actors often have the autonomy to choose and implement digital tools independently (Graf-Schlattmann et al., 2020). However, this loose coupling simultaneously limits the capacity for central steering (Kleimann, 2016; Pasternack et al., 2018), making structural change at the institutional level more challenging.

As a result, a dual dynamic becomes evident in HE innovation spaces, where innovative, often bottom-up processes are in contrast to institutional inertia (Graf-Schlattmann et al., 2021b). Projects amplify the structural tension between the widely noted organisational resistance to change (Schimank, 2005; Stock, 2004) and the more agile working modes within HEIs (Baecker, 2017). Addressing – or at least reducing – these structural contradictions appear to be essential: not only for realising the potential of agile innovation spaces in the form of projects, but also for enabling meaningful organisational transformation in HEIs.

Looking forward, several important questions remain. First, how can project closure processes better support institutionalisation and help enable HEIs to adopt and continue innovations beyond the funding period without excessive "loss"? Second, what motivates HEI decision-makers to apply for development project funding: genuine interest in structural change, compensation for resource constraints, or external funding as a performance indicator in academic competition? Answering these questions could provide valuable insights into the functional role of projects in HE development and offer new explanations for project-based academic governance.

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