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The Rise of the Centre of Excellence: Continuities, Transformations and Tensions in Governing a New University Model

Abstract

This study characterises *Centres of Excellence* (CoEs) in Germany as a new *university business model*. Unlike the traditional Humboldtian model, based upon chairs, the CoE is organised as a quasi-*department* with governance arrangements inspired by the New Public Management. Yet, little is known about the features that define this new model and its implications for collegial governance. Drawing on interviews with members of three CoEs in the Social Sciences and Humanities, the study undertakes an intra-organisational, micro-level analyses of the continuities, transformations, and tensions in collegial governance. It concludes by discussing the implications of these findings for our understanding of organisational change in the German context.

Keywords

governance, collegiality, leadership, organisational change, centres of excellence

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Der Aufstieg des Exzellenzclusters: Kontinuitäten, Wandel und Spannungen in der Governance eines neuen Universitätsmodells

Zusammenfassung

Diese Studie charakterisiert Centres of Excellence (CoE) – oder Exzellenzcluster – als ein neuartiges university business model. Im Gegensatz zum traditionellen Humboldt'schen Modell, das auf Lehrstühlen basiert, ist das CoE als Quasi-Department organisiert, dessen Governance-Strukturen vom New Public Management geprägt sind. Dennoch ist wenig darüber bekannt, welche Merkmale dieses neue Modell definieren und welche Auswirkungen es auf die kollegiale Governance hat. Basierend auf Interviews mit Mitgliedern von drei CoEs in den Sozial- und Geisteswissenschaften führt die Studie eine intraorganisatorische Mikroebenen-Analyse hinsichtlich der Kontinuitäten, Transformationen und Spannungen in der kollegialen Governance durch. Abschließend werden die Ergebnisse im Hinblick auf die Dynamiken organisationaler Veränderungen im deutschen Hochschulkontext diskutiert.

Schlüsselwörter

Governance, Kollegialität, Leadership, organisationaler Wandel, Centres of Excellence, Exzellenzcluster

1 Introduction

Germany has been described as a latecomer in the introduction of New Public Management (NPM) reforms. Accordingly, the old Humboldtian university model remains strong and the university is collegially self-governed by professors, based on core values and beliefs of university autonomy and academic freedom (Gerhardt et al., 2023; Hüther & Krücken, 2013; Schimank & Lange, 2009). However, in 2006, the federal government established an excellence scheme (nowadays called Excellence Strategy) aimed at strengthening competition among universities, whose main funding line is dedicated to the creation of Centres of Excellence (CoEs) (Flink & Peter, 2018; Krücken, 2021; Möller & Hornbostel, 2023). They exhibit one particularly distinctive organisational feature. Unlike the traditional Humboldtian model, organised around chairs each led by a professor, the CoE is organised as a quasi-department, not based on disciplinary chairs but on multidisciplinary ‘research areas’. The CoE can therefore be regarded as a new university business model that seeks to modernise the German university by fostering its ‘departmentalisation’ alongside more efficient governance arrangements.

However, little is known about the features that define this new university model and its implications for collegial governance. Thus, this paper asks: what are the elements that characterise this model? What are the implications for collegial governance? Based on the narratives of CoE members, this study offers an intra-organisational exploration of governance (Fumasoli & Stensaker, 2013), which in its traditional, collegial form is composed of “decision-making structures within a formal organization and a set of rules”, which are underpinned by values, beliefs and ideas (Sahlin & Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2024, p. 5). Governance is therefore concerned with definitions of purposes, leadership and decision-making processes, patterns of authority and hierarchy, and the relation to the world outside the university (Marginson & Cansidine, 2000).

Through the lens of archetype theory (Bruckmann & Carvalho, 2018; Greenwood & Hinings, 1988, 1993), this study aims to contribute to the literature on organisational change in higher education contexts, providing insights into a national case that

stands demonstratively for the local variations of reforms inspired by the NPM (e.g. Bleiklie et al., 2015; Hüther & Krücken, 2013).

2 Understanding the Centre of Excellence Through Archetype Theory

Through the lens of archetype theory (Greenwood & Hinings, 1988, 1993), university models can be understood as ‘ideal types’ (in the Weberian sense). Models (or archetypes) are composed by organisational structures as well as ideas, values and beliefs. In other words, organisational structures are based on the “intentions, aspirations and meanings or ‘interpretive schemes’” (Greenwood & Hinings, 1988, p. 295), the latter being a “set of ideas, beliefs and values that shape prevailing conceptions of what an organization should be doing, of how it should be doing it and how it should be judged” (p. 295). This study conceptualises two different models in order to understand how change occurs at the intra-organisational level: The old Humboldtian model of the *university of chairs* and the new university business model of the CoE, organised as a *quasi-department* (Bruckmann & Carvalho, 2018; Greenwood et al., 2014; Greenwood & Hinings, 1996).

In the Humboldtian university of chairs, collegial governance is based on the authority of chair holders, that is, the professoriate, who make decisions autonomously. They dominate collegial boards, which offer only limited representation to lower ranks, students, and professional staff (Bieletzki, 2018). Within these boards, chair holders possess equal rights and must reach consensus, avoiding decisions that could harm the interests of fellow professors. As a consequence, formal democratic majority rule becomes “a structure of informal veto-powers” (Schimank, 2005, p. 364). The main leadership positions (such as university presidents and deans) are elected by chair holders as *primus inter pares* but they remain weak, as their decisions require the approval of other professors. The predominance of the chair as the main organisational unit results in a highly compartmentalised university structure and

several “small hierarchies” (Bleiklie, 1998, p. 306). Professors have no direct superiors (Enders, 2001, p. 16), and can therefore

„direct the research activities of their research staff and make unilateral decisions about appointing PhD students and hiring postdocs, who are directly subordinate to a professor” (Hamann, 2019, p. 924).

This steep hierarchical system nonetheless fosters close working relationship between professors and their subordinated academic staff (see also Wilkesmann & Wagner, 2024).

The new university business model of the CoE, by contrast, adopts a quasi-departmental shape and governance arrangements inspired by the NPM, acting as “moderniser” (Bleiklie, 2018, p. 2) of the old Humboldtian university. The CoE model is characterised, first, by its ability to operate within a highly competitive environment – namely the race for excellence (Krücken, 2021) – as a complete organisation “with clear goals and managerial capacities to operate as strategic actors” (Bleiklie, 2018, p. 2), positioning itself both locally and internationally (Bloch, 2021; Fumasoli & Huisman, 2013; Krücken & Meier, 2006). Indeed, CoEs are based on ambitious multidisciplinary research programmes, deployed by more than a hundred affiliated members, who are physically co-located in dedicated facilities. Thanks to long-term funding, they seek to attract and train outstanding early career researchers and to become international hubs for renowned scholars worldwide, strengthening the visibility and prestige of the host university and the national research system as a whole (Vilches, 2025).

Second, the CoE is characterised by its novel, “efficient-collegial” governance arrangements (Bruckmann & Carvalho, 2018), which seek to manage efficiently the CoE’s multidisciplinary programme and ambitious goals, while maintaining authority and autonomous decision-making in the hands of the professoriate. These governance arrangements include one or two ‘spokespersons’, the key figure(s) leading the CoE and a ‘general board’ that meets annually or bi-annually and is dominated by up to 25 professors acting as Principal Investigators (PIs). However, it is within

the smaller ‘executive board’ and the ‘management office’, headed by a higher education professional, that everyday decisions and activities are made and coordinated. A ‘strategic board’ (also dominated by PIs) is in charge of more specific tasks and aims, such as steering the internationalisation of the CoE. Postdoctoral and doctoral researchers, as well as the professional staff, are represented in these board.

Central to this arrangement is, third, a stronger hierarchisation of decision-making processes, exemplified in the authority of the CoE leader (or spokesperson). Relying on NPM ideas according to which “higher education institutions cannot ‘afford’ the traditional collegial and procedural academic leadership (the *primus inter pares* model)” (Askling & Stensaker, 2002, p. 115), the CoE leader not only plays a key role in leading the CoE, but it is also part of a broader effort to strengthen the internal hierarchy of the university and the formal decision-making power of central authorities (Hüther & Krücken, 2013, p. 2), such as the university president, deans or, in this case, the CoE leader, who is ultimately legitimised by the presidency since CoE projects are submitted institutionally and not, as other research grants, by a single PI. Moreover, obtaining funding for two CoEs is a precondition for becoming eligible for the second funding line funded by the excellence scheme (called ‘Future Concepts’), which confers the title of excellence on a selected number of universities.

Given its importance and responsibilities, the CoE leader embodies a new type of leadership that evokes “the sense of a powerful and dynamic individual capable of bringing about change” (Macfarlane et al., 2024, p. 1383). Indeed, this figure may even gain representation on the university’s main governance board (Kosmützky & Krücken, 2023), which reflects the strategic importance the CoE – and its leader(s) – holds for the university as a whole.

Fourth, these more hierarchical and managerial governance arrangements are complemented by the ‘international advisory board’, composed of internationally renowned senior academics. They are aligned with NPM approaches of “steering at a distance” (Bleiklie, 2018, p. 4), which aims at strengthening mechanisms of evaluation “to ascertain the achievement of efficiency and quality goals” (Bleiklie, 2018,

p. 4). Such boards provide evaluative feedback, but they may also contribute to circumventing collegial decision-making (Stensaker et al., 2021).

3 Research Design

This is a small-N study based on interviews conducted with members of three CoEs in the SSH, funded by the German Excellence Strategy in 2019 for a six-year period. The CoE funding line accounts for 70 % of the total funding. One CoE had already received funding in a previous excellence round, while two began operations in 2019 but were based on previously obtained smaller collaborative grants. They were selected with the aim of achieving the broadest possible disciplinary heterogeneity within the SSH. On an imaginary continuum, at one extreme, one CoE integrates disciplines within the Humanities; at the other, a second CoE integrates a Social Science discipline with one from the Natural Sciences; and in the middle, the third CoE integrates a discipline in the Humanities with one in the Social Sciences.

The 16 participants in this study represent a subset of a larger project on research collaboration in CoEs and were chosen because of their involvement in decision-making processes. The sample includes six professors, all of whom are PIs in leadership positions (as spokespersons, research area co-leaders or board members) and five of whom participated in the formulation of the research programme; four post-docs (two in roles as research area co-leaders, one as scientific coordinator, and one as representative); four doctoral researchers (all in roles as representatives); and two professional staff members acting as managing directors. The interviews lasted an average of 55 minutes and were conducted online between 2021 and 2022, in German or English.

Methodologically, this study is rooted in constructivist Grounded Theory methodologies (Charmaz, 2014). The interview guide was designed following Döringer's (2021) variation of the 'problem-centred interview' approach, which encourages the development of narrative accounts. The participants' heterogeneous roles and positions in the academic hierarchy allowed the triangulation of perspectives, leading to

“broader, deeper, [and] more comprehensive understandings” (Bryant & Charmaz, 2019, p. 16). The data was coded twice using MAXQDA (Saldaña, 2021). Passages that contained rich descriptions of collegial relations and interactions were then re-analysed through three forms of collegiality: as governance, as research practice, and as allegiance to the institution. For this, I applied fine-grained analytical techniques (Bethman, 2019). Following the abductive logics of GT (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012), I then positioned and compared the accounts within two ideal types: the Humboldtian model (deduced from the literature) and the new CoE model (emerging from the interplay of findings and prior knowledge).

The participants’ truthful answers rely on the trust in the interviewer and assurance of anonymity. I avoid disclosing disciplinary details that could make them recognisable and use generic designations to describe both their roles and the CoE’s organisational arrangements.

4 Empirical Findings

The following analysis explores participants’ experiences in governing the CoE and highlights the interplay between the governance arrangements that characterise the CoE and the interpretive schemes upheld by the participants. It first identifies continuities with the Humboldtian model, then considers the transformations, and finally addresses the tensions, providing a nuanced picture of the micro-level implications of the CoE model for governance.

4.1 Continuities: Retaining Professorial Authority and Autonomy

The findings confirm that the professorial rank retains, in the formal sense, full authority and autonomy in governing the CoE, as the collegial-efficient governance arrangements suggest. In this respect, there is no significant transfer of authority to other academic ranks or professional staff. This aligns with the collegial aspect of the CoE model, where authority remains anchored in the professoriate. Ultimately,

decisions are made by the PIs on the various boards, with the support of professional staff, in a relationship characterised as respectful. Felicitas, managing director, observes that “there is still this fear that administrative roles take up too much space compared to research and project work”. Her comment indicates a considerable awareness of the importance of maintaining the traditional idea of collegiality.

Moreover, there is no observable transfer of formal authority to postdoctoral researchers, despite their status as the most senior researchers with full-time commitment to the CoE (in contrast, professors remain bound to their chairs). They play a key role in the daily functioning of the CoE, co-leading research areas and research seminars with the PIs. Yet, despite their commitment, they have not been granted additional formal authority.

Thus, there is no *internal* redistribution of authority across academic ranks or towards the professional staff. But is there any *external* threat to professorial authority and autonomy? In this regard, the international advisory board does not fundamentally threaten the autonomy of professors, nor does it introduce the kind of “steering at a distance” favoured by NPM approaches (Bleiklie, 2018; Maassen et al., 2017). Rather, it assumes a ‘soft’ evaluative and consultative role. Its tasks vary across CoEs but generally include periodic assessments. In one CoE, the advisory board has assumed more specific tasks, such as supporting the evaluation of internal research grants. Sara (professor, deputy spokesperson) comments that proposals are first evaluated by a working group and the “... smaller pool goes to the advisory board and sometimes the really crucial issues are discussed there”. Nevertheless, the board is far from constituting a new form of “controlled collegiality” (Stensaker et al., 2021). One professor remarks that the influence of such boards ultimately depends on the willingness of professors to accept evaluation, which is why they can quickly become “a tiger without teeth” (Tobias, professor).

4.2 Transformations: The CoE Leader and the Managerial Ethos

Alongside to the continuities described above, significant transformations can be observed, that align with the NPM approaches and managerial values underpinning the CoE model. The professoriate, as rank, retains formal authority and autonomy, but within the professoriate a clear hierarchisation can be observed, which breaks the egalitarian Humboldtian collegial tradition (Hüther & Krücken, 2013). The emergence of the CoE leader is a noteworthy development. This professor is widely recognised by professors, early career researchers and professional staff as someone with evident leadership abilities, and as the figure who took the “initiative” to build the CoE (Lea, managing director). They clearly embody the prestige gained from the successful application to the most renowned German grant. Their formal authority, complementing their symbolic status, is granted by the university presidency. Evidence shows that a small group of professors played a key role during the project’s formulation process, with one or two of them later becoming the CoEs’ spokesperson(s). Antonia (professor and spokesperson) comments that “it was the initiative of the university president ... who approached a colleague and me ... so that we formulated this centre”.

This hierarchisation within the professoriate is accompanied by values and beliefs reflecting the emergence of a managerial ethos, according to which the CoE is to be managed effectively to achieve its ambitious strategic objectives. Participants are aware of the highly competitive nature of the excellence race, the symbolic relevance of the CoE both as a standalone centre *and* for the university as a whole, and the importance of prevailing in the next excellence round. In that regard, while the lack of a strong advisory board – as shown above – and the of absence of regular evaluative visits from the funding agency, as occurs in Scandinavian countries (Alnor et al., 2023), may create the impression that the CoE’s autonomy and professorial authority are unaffected, a different interpretation is possible. The steering at a distance does not occur through collegial feedback from the advisory board, or committees

of experts, but by the ability to renew funding after six years, which creates a situation of winner/loser: either retaining the excellence status or losing it entirely.

To demonstrate performance and quality, participants provide several examples of how the CoE records outputs and stimulates the production of multidisciplinary work, for instance by publishing co-edited books, organising conferences, fostering the incoming mobility of renowned international scholars, and providing funding for outgoing sojourns.

It is also possible to identify an example of change in the CoE's governance arrangements. Participants explain how the recruitment process for early career researchers was made more efficient: a special committee was created to lead and control the recruitment process and decide on appointments. The final decision could then only be approved or rejected by the main board – but not modified. This reform introduces a new decision-making process while retaining elements of collegial control and representation, in an efficient-collegial vein (Bruckmann & Carvalho, 2018).

These examples illustrate how the competitive pressures in which the CoE is embedded have created a strong stimulus for the emergence of a managerial, performance-driven ethos within the CoE, alongside the integration between academic and professorial staff, “which embraces planning, resource management, personnel policy, productivity measures, as well as public relation” (Bleiklie, 1998, p. 308).

4.3 Tensions: Overstretching Collegial Governance

One interpretation of the continuities and transformations described above is that they underpin the collegial-efficient governance arrangements that characterise the CoE. According to Bruckman and Carvalho, in such a model/archetype the two key values of “efficiency and democratic decision-making” co-exist (Bruckmann & Carvalho, 2018, p. 643). However, the tensions described below suggest a different relationship: collegial and managerial values stand more in tension than in complementary co-existence. Overall, traditional collegial values appear stronger than managerialism, which correlates with the maintenance of authority by professors. Yet the

quasi-departmental and multidisciplinary shape of the CoE, alongside competitive pressures, creates several tensions that overstretch the old Humboldtian ideas, values and beliefs that sustain collegial governance, while expectations of efficiency and effectiveness are not always met.

One tension concerns the relations within the professoriate and the upholding of democratic values in the CoE. Martin (professor, research area co-leader) explains that making reforms to the CoE entails a “democratic process. I am just one of 25 [PIs]. I am single discipline ... In smaller structures, things could certainly be done differently or more simply”. His observation highlights the difficulty of applying democratic values – rooted in disciplinarily more homogenous chairs and institutes – in the large, multidisciplinary department-like CoE. Professional staff share this view. Felicitas notes that “consensus-building in the general assembly is the biggest challenge. This is, of course, an important democratic principle, but it makes strategic processes difficult”, whilst Lea (managing director) cautiously suggests that to “respond quickly I would make some adjustments to the board structure – though not radical ones”. These participants do not fundamentally question the democratic values underpinning collegial governance but are aware that the formal maintenance of authority in boards dominated by professors overstretches collegial governance, making it less effective in managing both every day and strategic decisions-making processes.

Another tension concerns the professorial self-understanding of leadership within the CoE. While the figure of the CoE leader is clearly identifiable and their leadership abilities praised, other professors seem to struggle with their roles as PIs, highlighting a tension between their traditional roles as chair-holders – with the corresponding ideas and values – and the new expectations of leadership set by the CoE. Professorial participants provide examples suggesting a lack of confidence in their ability to lead the CoE effectively. They acknowledge that the role of PI demands skills not typically required in the traditional chair structure. For example, Sara reflects that leading the CoE “... it often really does require diplomatic tact [and], honestly, you would actually need training in something like this”, whereas Tobias adds

“... there are really outstanding young people involved but we, at the leadership level, are basically unable to manage it properly. Why? Because none of us has ever been trained to do it”.

Martin, in reflecting on potential improvements to the doctoral training programme, resigns himself to the fact that “... I wouldn’t know how it could be done better or differently”.

Hence, the managerial ethos has not permeated all professors. These professors appear closer to the figure of the “reluctant leader” who tries to be a “good citizen” (Deem et al., 2003, p. 9) by engaging as a PI in the CoE, while their authority – strong in the chairs – becomes less effective in the CoE. Although the authority of the professoriate, as a rank, is not at risk, the fact that professors themselves – who constitute the very basis of Humboldtian collegial governance – question their own individual leadership abilities strongly underpins the idea that collegial governance is being overstretched in the CoE.

This leads to a third tension regarding the relations across academic ranks. Unlike the small hierarchies and relations of dependency that characterise the university of chairs (Schimank, 2005), in the CoE a single, large hierarchical gap emerges between professors and early career researchers. Professors acknowledge the difficulties this gap poses for collegial decision-making, which limits the representation of non-professorial academic staff but facilitates dialogue across ranks within each chair. Sara (professor) emphasises that

“... personally, I always prefer diplomatic approaches ... and involving everyone in the discussions, but, of course, that’s difficult in a centre the size of the Titanic”.

She further comments that in smaller structures “... if there is an issue, then you just sit down together and talk about it” (Sara).

This gap is particularly pronounced between professors and the doctoral rank. One doctoral representative describes a discussion at the CoE’s main board concerning her rank as “... well, unfortunately, I experienced it more as being against each other

rather than working together” (Christiane, doctoral representative), whereas another representative describes decision-making processes as “non-transparent [and] strongly hierarchical” (Maike, doctoral representative).

This gap reflects the unresolved tensions created by the CoE’s quasi-departmental structure and its governance arrangements. The CoE has only a very thin layer of intermediate leadership with formal, effective authority, operating at the interface between professors and lower academic ranks, and between governance bodies at the top and the challenging multidisciplinary research practice on the ground. As mentioned above, postdoctoral researchers do not possess the formal authority to effectively bridge the gap between professors and early-career researchers, especially doctoral researchers. Another consequence of this tension is the emergence of new sense of allegiance towards the doctoral or postdoctoral academic rank *and* to the multidisciplinary CoE – and not towards the professor as chair-holder and the discipline represented by the chair.

5 Concluding Remarks and Policy Implications

This paper has characterised the CoE as a new university business model. The empirical findings have explored the micro-level experiences of CoE members in governing the CoE, highlighting the continuities, transformations, and tensions this model creates. I suggest two different readings of the findings.

The first interpretation focuses on the CoE model itself, noting that it exemplifies a new university business model that introduces a quasi-departmental structure within the Humboldtian university of chairs, alongside collegial-efficient governance arrangements and values inspired by the NPM. This interpretation suggests that the Humboldtian idea of collegial governance prevails over hard managerialism: the authority of professors and key values such as democratic decision-making in collegial boards are largely maintained. However, managerial approaches promote stronger

central leadership (Askling & Stensaker, 2002, p. 115) and hierarchisation of decision-making processes, underpinned by the emergence of a managerial ethos, as anticipated by NPM approaches (Bleiklie, 2018; Krucken & Meier, 2006). This creates tensions that are indicative of an overstretching of collegial governance, rather than a stable and balanced co-existence of collegial approaches and values with managerial hierarchy and efficiency. On the one hand, this highlights the strengths of NPM approaches in modernising organisations (Bleiklie, 2018), while simultaneously reshaping the organisational and disciplinary foundations of collegiality through the creation of a multidisciplinary department. On the other hand, the findings underscore the professoriate's resistance to delegating power and its commitment to maintaining key elements of the Humboldtian model.

The defence of the Humboldtian model constrains the “range of likely organisational designs” (Greenwood & Hinings, 1993, p. 1057), limiting therefore the influence of NPM approaches, for example, by hindering the introduction of stronger external evaluative devices or by resisting the creation of a new layer of middle leadership with formal authority, as professors continue to dominate governance bodies, contrary to what a comprehensive NPM-inspired departmentalisation would require. In this sense, the CoE represents a new university business model anchored in the local German context, which has selectively adopted NPM approaches while maintaining core Humboldtian governance arrangements and values, adopting a collegial-efficient model/archetype that, however, is underpinned by significant tensions (Bruckmann & Carvalho, 2018; Hüther & Krücken, 2013).

A second reading situates this new university business model in the context of broader, university-wide organisational change. From that point of view, university models within an organisation can compete (Greenwood & Hinings, 1993, 1996) or become hybrids (Bruckmann & Carvalho, 2018). When the CoE model – with its associated transformations, tensions and overstretching of collegial governance – is set against the Humboldtian model, the two appear clearly incompatible. Remarkably, this new university business model introduces managerial elements alongside a multidisciplinary departmentalisation that reshapes “disciplines, and the collegial cultures and networks which sustain them” (Marginson & Cansidine, 2000, p. 10).

Thus, the significance of this managerial departmentalisation for the Humboldtian university should not be underestimated. One tension is particularly crucial. The absence of a middle layer of leadership within this quasi-department emphasises the need either to concede greater authority to professional staff – a stronger form of managerialisation – or to reform the academic career – the softer variant – by transferring formal authority to non-professorial academic ranks. Either scenario would ultimately lead to a recomposition of governance bodies, which in turn, increases the likelihood of a complete overhauling of the Humboldtian university and the chair system on which it is based. From this perspective, the findings provide valuable insights into the transformations, continuities, and tensions in governance that a university-wide departmentalisation of the Humboldtian university would unleash.

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